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School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures

Comparative Literature and Culture

# **The Migrant's Corner: Representing Mediterranean Migrations in Contemporary French and Italian Culture**

By

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Royal Holloway, September 2018



## **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Caterina Scarabicchi, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

Since the early 1990s, international migration has become one of the most pressing issues concerning the relationship between Western countries and formerly colonized nations. As the European Union increasingly adopts an attitude of closure towards African and Middle Eastern migrants and asylum seekers, stories of transnational migration have progressively occupied the forefront of the socio-political debates in the public sphere. This thesis engages with the representation of contemporary Mediterranean journeys that have circulated in Italy and France across the media of literature, film and the spaces of museums and festivals since the 2000s. Despite the efforts to include the voices of the protagonists of these stories, the majority of the cultural production about present migration to the EU is authored by Europeans themselves. I argue that such production lies at the problematic junction between social commitment and advocacy for migrants on the one hand, and humanitarian and neo-colonial rhetoric on the other. Indeed, while Italian and French voices are playing a crucial role in defending the rights of migrants and refugees struggling to express their own political and public agency, these texts, films and spatial narratives simultaneously raise fundamental issues of ethics and authenticity which have largely remained ignored in previous analyses of this corpus. Addressing these complexities through an interdisciplinary and comparative approach, the thesis will shed light on the crucial challenge for European intellectuals and artists to include migrant voices and the Other's story in movements of cultural activism and mobilization.



## Acknowledgements

Undertaking a doctoral project has been a life-changing experience for me, in many ways. The first thank you goes to my two supervisors, Prof James Williams and Dr Fabrizio De Donno, who have constantly guided, encouraged and supported me throughout these four years with their expertise and professionalism. I am deeply indebted to them for convincing me never to give up, and to follow my passion while learning the tools of a good researcher. Secondly, I would like to express my gratitude to the School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Royal Holloway for granting me the Mary Slack Award in 2015 and for funding my fieldwork in Lampedusa and Paris, which was crucial for the development of my research. I am deeply grateful to Agnes, Mariangela and Celeste for involving me in the AHRC-funded project 'Responding to Crisis', an experience that nurtured my passion and engagement for migration and the arts between Keele, Naples and London. I would also like to thank all the many colleagues that, in the course of these years, have inspired me with their ideas and projects.

This thesis is dedicated to all the friends in Calais, Lampedusa, London, Paris and Florence, and to our adventures together. To Gaia, Isabella, Caterina, Lisa, Francesco, Sascha and Michela, who have hosted me, comforted me and made me have fun in the midst of existential crises. To Maria Luisa, and our "shared" flat in Gloucester Green, forever a place of the mind. To Mohammed and Samir, and to that shared temporary space between France and the UK. To Nia, Shaffira, Trish and all the others, and our days in the car and in the warehouse. To the colleagues in the most disparate workplaces in Oxford, especially at the Oxford Botanic Garden, and to our cheerful banter in the green. To Guido and Charlène, to their love and hospitality in that magical house in Brixton. To all my marvellous, inspiring students in Florence, who in this past year have shown me a side of myself that I wasn't sure existed.

The greatest gratitude goes to my family, who helped me put things in perspective and supported me through difficult times. To Ariel and Puck for a year of patient, purring presence. But the final thank you goes to Aldo, who, rain or shine, has always been wonderfully there.





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## Introduction

'To understand society is to understand migration, and to understand migration is to better understand society'. (Hein De Haas, 'Migration Theory: Quo Vadis?', 2014, p. 16).

'We have the right to move and the right to not be forced to move. We demand the same privileges as corporations and the international elite, as they have the freedom to travel and to establish themselves where they choose. We are all worthy of opportunity and the chance to progress. We all have the right to a better life'. (Immigrant Movement International, 'Migrant Manifesto', 2011, point 3).

With a total of dead or missing persons rising to over 30,000 since 2000, the waters separating Europe from Africa have been repeatedly declared the deadliest route for migrants and asylum seekers in the world.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), of the total toll of 1,008 migrant deaths worldwide in the first four months of 2018, over half occurred in the Mediterranean Sea, which represents the major – and more dangerous – obstacle in the journey towards European countries.<sup>2</sup> As the number of people fleeing poverty and war increases each year, so do the restrictive measures put in place at the EU borders to prevent access to unauthorized individuals. Over the last decades, multiplying barbed wires, fences and checkpoints have caused thousands of displaced people to be stranded for months or years in destitution at the external boundaries of the continent, which have been turned into temporary and often unofficial refugee camps – fertile ground for human trafficking and human rights violations.

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<sup>1</sup> International Organization for Migration, 'New Study Concludes Europe's Mediterranean Border Remains 'World's Deadliest'', <https://www.iom.int/news/new-study-concludes-europes-mediterranean-border-remains-worlds-deadliest> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Since the early 2000s, the movement of migrants towards Europe has increasingly been referred to in the media and in the political discourse as a veritable ‘crisis’: the ‘Mediterranean crisis’, or the ‘EU migrant or refugee crisis’. However, these expressions must be problematised: as many scholars have argued,<sup>3</sup> identifying unauthorised human mobility as an unexpected emergency that may impact negatively on the destination countries often serves to justify the adoption of extraordinary measures on the part of governments towards displaced individuals. Yet, the prolonged violation of human rights at the borders of Europe has by now become the norm, rather than an exception dictated by extreme circumstances. Indeed, forced removals, arbitrary detention and police violence are everyday occurrences in France, Italy or Greece, as in other EU countries. Thus, the choice of the term ‘crisis’ to define contemporary migrations should not be regarded as a neutral definition, but as a politically charged act that legitimizes a reactive policy of ‘closed borders’, rather the adoption of more humane, long-term measures to respond to the unprecedented numbers of people attempting to reach Europe.

Even though the number of arrivals is technically manageable by EU countries, especially compared to Middle East nations such as Jordan or Turkey, or African countries like Kenya and Uganda, which host the biggest refugee camps in the world, most EU member states are still refusing to increase their quotas of arrivals on national territory, justifying themselves with the impossibility for Western countries to accept and provide for any more displaced people.<sup>4</sup> This position is still

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<sup>3</sup> For a critical reflection on the key terms used to describe contemporary migrations, see Nicholas De Genova, Martina Tazzioli and Soledad Álvarez-Velasco, ‘Europe/Crisis: New Keywords of “the Crisis” in and of “Europe”’, *Near Futures Online*, 1 (2016), 1-45. See also Julien Jeandesboz and Polly Pallister-Wilkins, ‘Crisis, Routine, Consolidation: The Politics of the Mediterranean Migration Crisis’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 21.2 (2016), 316-20.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the increasing closure of EU borders and the stories of the migrants attempting to cross them, see Daniel Trilling, *Lights in the Distance: Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe* (London: Picador, 2018) and Olivier Favier, *Chroniques d'exil et d'hospitalité: Vies de migrants, ici et ailleurs* (Paris: Le Passager Clandestin, 2016).

aptly summarized in the words pronounced back in 1989 by the then French Prime Minister Michel Rocard: 'La France ne peut pas accueillir toute la misère du monde' (France cannot welcome all the misery of the world).<sup>5</sup> In France like in Italy, the newly elected government has targeted migration as a crucial theme for their populist rhetoric in order to increase their voters' consensus, contributing to spread an attitude of "zero tolerance" towards undocumented migrants.

The state of migrants' rights in today's France is well epitomized by the progressive strengthening of control and repression in its border areas. In Calais, the repeated destruction of spontaneous refugee camps between 2002 and 2016 and the frequent episodes of police violence against irregular migrants have transformed France into a deeply hostile country for immigrants, leading to the conclusion that human rights and international conventions are not to be taken for granted by displaced individuals who live under constant threat of deportation. At the border with Italy, French police has undertaken a systematic refoulement strategy, denying access to all those who, in public spaces, on trains and in the street, are racially profiled as potentially illegal migrants and arrested or reconducted at the Italian frontier. Similar episodes have become frequent in Paris as well, where temporary settlements in sheltered areas, such as the areas below the metro station of La Chapelle are destroyed, and its inhabitants forcibly dispersed.<sup>6</sup> Finally, like a growing number of EU countries, France has suspended the Schengen agreement allowing the free circulation of people across

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<sup>5</sup> Juliette Deborde, "Misère du monde", ce qu'a vraiment dit Michel Rocard', *Libération*, 22 April 2015, [http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/04/22/misere-du-monde-ce-qu-a-vraiment-dit-michel-rocard\\_1256930](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/04/22/misere-du-monde-ce-qu-a-vraiment-dit-michel-rocard_1256930) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>6</sup> See Angelique Chrisafis, 'Police remove 2,000 refugees and migrants sleeping rough in Paris', *Guardian*, 7 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/07/french-police-evict-2000-refugees-and-migrants-sleeping-rough-in-paris> [accessed 10 September 2018] and Eleonora Camilli, 'Reception of migrants in Paris crumbles at Porte de la Chapelle', *Open Migration*, 19 July 2017, <https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/reception-of-migrants-in-paris-crumbles-at-porte-de-la-chapelle/> [accessed 10 September 2018].



the borders of some member states. Although the victory of the moderate left candidate Emmanuel Macron as President in June 2017 prevented the victory of the xenophobic Front National party of Marine Le Pen, the hopes for more humane immigration policies have been shattered by an escalation of anti-immigration rhetoric based on national security conducted by Macron, who declared that France would no longer allow a 'new jungle in Calais'.<sup>7</sup>

In the Italian context, the debate has recently focused on the role of Italy as Europe's first port of call for migrants arriving by sea, but also on the lack of collaboration between national authorities and the European Union. Indeed, the short-lived search and rescue initiative Mare Nostrum, aimed at intercepting and rescuing migrant boats in the Mediterranean, was financed only by the then centre-left Italian government and did not receive the support of other EU member states, to the point that politicians, experts and public opinion were led to feel that Italy, like Greece, had been "abandoned" by the EU to handle such a critical situation alone.<sup>8</sup> Besides fomenting anti-EU feelings, the inevitable geographic exposure of the peninsula to the arrival of asylum seekers has favoured the growth of new waves of anti-immigration positions, which have reached their peak shortly after the long-negotiated formation a new government in June 2018, born out of the compromise between the xenophobic League Party and the populist Five Star Movement. The prompt decision of new Minister of the

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<sup>7</sup> Kim Willsher, 'France will not allow another refugee camp in Calais, says Macron', *Guardian*, 16 January 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/16/macron-visits-calais-before-migrant-crisis-meeting-with-may> [accessed 10 September 2018]. For the French context, with particular reference to the migrant camps in northern France, see Michel Agier et al., *The Jungle: Calais's Camps and Migrants* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2018) and Michel Agier, *L'Étranger qui vient: Repenser l'hospitalité* (Paris: Seuil, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Angela Giuffrida, 'Italy feels the heat as EU shuts doors to migrants', *Guardian*, 23 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/22/italy-feels-heat-europe-slams-door-on-migrants> [accessed 10 September 2018] and George Grigoropoulos, 'EU has largely 'abandoned' Greece to deal with migrant crisis on its own, UN expert warns, *UN News*, 17 May 2016,

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/05/529462-eu-has-largely-abandoned-greece-deal-migrant-crisis-its-own-un-expert-warns> [accessed 10 September 2018].

Interior Matteo Salvini to close Italy's harbours to NGO rescue boats, refusing permission to dock to the vessel Aquarius carrying over 600 refugees and migrants departed from Libya, has certainly caused the disagreement of EU leaders, but in the end only Spain accepted to let the boat arrive at Valencia's harbour.<sup>9</sup> The case of humanitarian NGOs, which have repeatedly been accused of *buonismo* (goody-goody attitude), of being a pull factor for migrants leaving Libya and of conniving with human traffickers still profoundly divides public opinion and the tense political balance in Italy. However, this is only the latest of many alarming episodes, such as the shooting of migrants in Florence in 2011 and 2018, or the racist raid of Macerata in May 2018, few weeks before national elections.<sup>10</sup>

These recent developments in Italy and France are the historical result of a progressive development of xenophobic feelings of closure towards the migrant as a foreigner. Since the 1990s the perception of a migrant "invasion" has occupied the forefront of the public sphere in Europe, inflated by mass media such as television, press and, increasingly, social media, and encouraged by the alarmist tones of conservative parties and xenophobic movements, by now established and "normalized" in the political life of both Italy and France. Such phenomena are by now part of a global trend, within developed countries across the globe, to treat transnational migration of

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<sup>9</sup> Crispian Balmer, 'Italy's Salvini shuts ports to rescue boat carrying hundreds of refugees and migrants', *Independent*, 10 June 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italy-matteo-salvini-immigration-rescue-shut-port-league-malta-refugee-migrant-a8392571.html> [accessed 10 September 2018] and Sam Jones, 'Aquarius migrants arrive in Spain after rough week at sea', *Guardian*, 17 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/17/migrant-rescue-ship-aquarius-to-dock-in-spain-after-rough-week-at-sea> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Tom Kington, 'Florence gunman shoots Senegalese street vendors dead', *Guardian*, 13 December 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/13/florence-gunman-shoots-street-vendors> [accessed 10 September 2018] and Jason Horowitz, 'This Italian town once welcomed migrants. Now, it's a symbol for right-wing politics', *New York Times*, 7 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/07/world/europe/italy-macerata-migrants.html> [accessed 10 September 2018].

unauthorized and uninvited migrants as a crime, justifying severe policies of pushback, at land as at sea borders. It suffices to think of the case of Australia and its surrounding archipelago of detention centres, repeatedly exposed by human rights activists for their arbitrary imprisonment of asylum seekers, or of the aggressive campaigns to reduce the number of illegal immigrants in the US or UK territory, or of the countless charter flights, organized by Western countries, to forcibly repatriate individuals fleeing persecution in their homeland, to realize that migration is less and less seen as an inalienable right of the individual and increasingly as a privilege of the wealthy global elite.

For its part, over the last five years Europe has externalized border controls to third countries with appalling records of human rights violations, reaching economic deals with African nations such as Libya and Niger, or neighbouring nations such as Turkey, in order to obtain their assistance in reducing the number of displaced individuals attempting to start the Mediterranean crossing. Thus, with the support of stronger waves of xenophobia and intolerance, Europe as a potential host society has rapidly transformed into a "rejecting" society, in which the foreigner is considered as a threatening body to be expelled.

### **Bridges and Walls: Representing the Migrant's Story**

In the attempt to document these complex processes, mainstream media have often contributed to the spectacularization and ultimately dehumanization of contemporary migration, encouraging stereotyped representations of migrants as victims or as nameless crowds on the one hand, and contributing to a humanitarian narrative of the migrant's story, based on pity, on the other. However, the inflated hypervisibility of migrant stories in mass media has also constituted the point of

departure for artistic representations authored by EU voices. In response to flattening and victimizing portrayals, writers, filmmakers and visual artists have advanced personal creations aimed at bringing to the fore more humanized images of mobility, drawing on the aesthetic potential of art to re-imagine reality and challenge the political *status quo*, and ultimately exploring alternative visibilities for the migrant's story in the EU public space. Notable examples are literary works such as *Eldorado* by Laurent Gaudé (2006) and *Solo Andata* by Erri De Luca (2005), or of films like Emanuele Crialese's *Terraferma* (2011) and *Éden à l'ouest* by Costa-Gavras (2009). From their prominent positions of public figures in the European cultural debate, these authors and filmmakers have combined their art with the commitment to denounce the conditions endured by migrants today. In fact, besides their artistic production, these artists have denounced Europe's appalling treatment of displaced individuals by means of reportages and petitions in the press and on television. In France many appeals were published, such as the 'Appel des 800' drafted in 2015 by filmmakers, actors and prominent public figures to denounce the harsh living conditions of migrants stuck at the border in Calais.<sup>11</sup> Several manifestos, such as the 'Migrant Manifesto' written by Immigrant International and artist Tania Bruguera in 2011, Patrick Chamoiseau's 'Déclaration des Poètes' in 2017,<sup>12</sup> or the 'Lampedusa Charter' drafted in 2014,<sup>13</sup> have brought migrants' claims and freedom of movement at the avant-garde of civil rights together with freedom of expression, gender equality, environmental and indigenous struggles, anti-capitalist and anti-poverty efforts. Furthermore, the increased securitization of Europe's external borders has promptly led to the formation of numerous activist networks in EU countries, concentrating around

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<sup>11</sup>Libération, 'Jungle de Calais: l'appel des 800', *Libération*, 20 October 2015, [http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/10/20/jungle-de-calais-l-appel-des-800\\_1407520](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/10/20/jungle-de-calais-l-appel-des-800_1407520) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, *Frères Migrants* (Paris: Seuil, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.lacartadilampedusa.org/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

crucial border locations such as Lampedusa, Ventimiglia, Calais in coordination with movements based in major cities like Paris, Berlin and Rome. The common aims of all these groups are the opposition to increased border control and the illegalization of migration as answers to the current mass movements of people from Africa to Europe, and the call for more welcoming and humane policies towards forced and non-forced African migrants.<sup>14</sup>

The ways in which European citizens perceive of contemporary migrations remains deeply influenced by the portrayal provided by mass media. However, already in 1967, philosopher Guy Debord observed that, in late capitalist society, communication has increasingly been based on spectacularization. In his famous text *La société du spectacle*, he defined ‘spectacle’ as the passive processing of information which citizens derive from the sensationalist representation of reality conveyed by mass media.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, similar observations were made recently by Nicholas De Genova concerning the hypervisibility of migration towards Western countries in the news and political discourse. In his theorization of the ‘border spectacle’, he denounces the fact that illegal migrants are portrayed as an indistinct mass of poor and unskilled foreigners, which could pose a threat to national security.<sup>16</sup> This inflated depiction is often used in conservative state rhetoric to justify the adoption of stricter border surveillance to limit the entry of “undesired” migrants – in particular, African migrants, both

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<sup>14</sup> These movements reflect crucial ethical concerns which have been expressed by key philosophers such as Levinas, Derrida and Butler over the last two decades. The sense of moral duty towards the foreigner is at the basis of one of Derrida’s last publication *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), while the witnessing and the relationship with the vulnerable other is a crucial aspect in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004) and Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009). Regarding the advocacy for migrants’ rights, see also Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writings, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Black & Red (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013 [1967]).

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas De Genova, ‘Migrant Illegality and deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31.1 (2002), 419-47.

often undocumented and unskilled, and racially more “visible” in the European context, therefore exposed to more discrimination and violence- and to encourage the spread of xenophobic feelings towards foreigners, ‘ontologizing’ them in a veritable form of ‘stranger fetishism’, as Sara Ahmed has underlined.<sup>17</sup> The image of the border, constantly featuring in news reports and newspaper headings, is therefore transformed into the centre of a media spectacle, in which a risk of invasion appears always imminent.

Of course, media representations are not homogeneous. There have been major attempts to redress these stereotyped portrayals, such as the Carta di Roma in Italy, which campaigns to debunk inflated representations of migration, and functions as a fundamental data gathering on media depictions of the EU “migratory crisis”.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the protagonists of migration remain central targets in the so-called ‘post-truth’ era, in which the nuances of complex facts are substituted by strong and reassuring ideological positions, and in which the appeal of a certain statement is prioritized over its truthfulness.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, post-truth journalism has been marked by the circulation of fake news concerning the arrival of migrants at the EU borders, especially on the internet and on the newly-developed platforms of social media. For example, in July 2016 former French European Deputy and National Front member Bernard Monot denounced in a Facebook post that asylum seekers in France receive up to forty euros per day in state benefits, while in reality they are only given less than seven.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 5. Regarding the border in Lampedusa, see Paolo Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine. Lampedusa tra produzione e messa in scena della frontiera* (Milan: Mimesis, 2012) and “Borderizing’ the Island Setting and Narratives of the Lampedusa ‘Border Play’” *ACME*, 13.2 (2014), 196-219.

<sup>18</sup> [www.cartadiroma.org](http://www.cartadiroma.org) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>19</sup> On post-truth, see Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2017) and Matthew D’Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Observers, ‘How fake images spread racist stereotypes about migrants across the globe’, *France 24*, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20180105-fake-images-racist-stereotypes-migrants> [accessed 10 September 2018].

Similar fake news also regularly circulate in the Facebook and Twitter feeds of Italian users. However, in the Italian context a privileged object of misinformation remains the number of migrant arrivals at the country's southern coasts. An extreme example of this trend occurred in July 2018, when an image circulated on Facebook, supposedly showing thousands of African migrants waiting to embark illegally for Italy. However, the image was actually portraying the fans at the Pink Floyd concert in Venice, taken in 1989.<sup>21</sup> In both cases, the facts about contemporary mobility were manipulated in favour of easy, spectacularising answers to “gut” feelings of xenophobia, ultimately aimed at preserving the privileges of the global North.

The notion of spectacle appears crucial also in the work of media scholar Lilie Chouliaraki, who has argued, following Luc Boltanski's observations on the watching of ‘distant suffering’, that the media spectator in contemporary society experiences a compassion fatigue when looking at the “hypervisible” narratives of hardship of migrants on the screen. Such images, she claims, have lost their power to shock and move the audience, since they are so abundant in the public sphere to the point of losing any meaning.<sup>22</sup> With regards to this desensitization, Chouliaraki has highlighted the disempowering victimization that marks much of the representation of suffering non-Western individuals in situations of poverty, natural disasters and deprivation.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in her analysis humanitarianism is no longer a neutral term to refer to governmental actions aimed at providing relief

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<sup>21</sup> Agenzia Giornalistica Italia, ‘La bufala dei migranti pronti a salpare per l'Italia con la foto del concerto dei Pink Floyd’, AGI, 14 July 2018, [https://www.agi.it/cronaca/pink\\_floyd\\_migranti\\_bufala-4105490/news/2018-07-04/](https://www.agi.it/cronaca/pink_floyd_migranti_bufala-4105490/news/2018-07-04/) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>22</sup> Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> See Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: SAGE, 2006) and *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). The attempt to counter disempowering images of suffering individuals is also at the basis of the Rusty Radi-Aid Award, which examines humanitarian campaigns each year and awards the most, but especially the least, ethical ones which present Western aid as ‘white saviours’. See <https://www.radiaid.com/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

to populations suffering from famine, war or natural calamities, but it rather indicates a discourse, typical of aid and development campaigns, that essentialises Western subjects as rescuers and struggling individuals as powerless victims.<sup>24</sup> Chouliaraki's critical reading is particularly useful to understand humanitarianism as a narrative of power that not only relies on pity towards supposedly passive subjects, but also focuses primarily on the benevolence of the rescuers, rather than the agency and perspective of those who are assisted. In fact, reading 'humanitarianism' critically is fundamental to decipher contemporary narratives of migration, as these too heavily rely on a humanitarian discourse. Especially in the representations of Mediterranean crossings, the migrant is still usually depicted as a victim of external circumstances, dependent on EU assistance, in a narrative that seems to reinforce the vantage position of European actors, and to further silence the agency of migrants in difficulty. Thus, the terms 'humanitarianism' and 'humanitarian' in this thesis will be used to indicate a disempowering mode of narrating migrant mobility, particularly in the case of EU representations which are supposed to advocate for the rights of the displaced.

Similar reflections are advanced by Devika Sharma, who has efficiently summarized the sense of guilt at the basis of the logic of humanitarianism in the title of her article 'Feeling Bad, Doing Good'.<sup>25</sup> In this piece, Sharma stresses that the ubiquity of images of suffering others has caused a crisis of witnessing, both in the media and in public spaces, for which the spectator feels guilty and powerless at the view of individuals in distress, losing the ability to react to the scenes witnessed. Indeed, both Chouliaraki and Sharma have underlined that it is necessary to doubt of the potential of such images to mobilize in an

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<sup>24</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki, 'Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication Beyond a Politics of Pity', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13.2 (2010), 107–26.

<sup>25</sup> Devika Sharma, 'Doing Good, Feeling Bad: Humanitarian Emotion in Crisis', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 9.1 (2017), 1–12.



ethical way the public opinion in favour of welcoming migrants and refugees to Europe.

In response to mass media representations which are increasingly perceived to be inadequate and unethical for their dehumanizing and spectacularized nature, over the last decade a growing corpus of cultural texts has attempted to provide alternative portrayals of Mediterranean migration. The central aim of this thesis is to investigate the ways in which Italian and French artists and institutions have represented the migratory journeys of African and Middle Eastern migrants to Europe since the early 2000s. I will analyse the recent literary and cinematic production, and the temporary or permanent spaces created in both countries to represent migration, as significant examples that illustrate the major narrative trends marking the European perspective on these human itineraries. Such analysis will reveal recurring problematic patterns of how the European public debate – in politics, in the media and indeed in the Arts – receives, and inevitably re-elaborates, the migrant's story. With notable exceptions, the majority of cultural representations about today's Mediterranean mobilities are still predominantly narrated by European voices, rather than by migrants themselves. Although they constitute an increasingly growing corpus, the representations issued from a European point of view are often either easily dismissed as 'too European' or interpreted as necessarily useful and ethical because they originate from a sense of social commitment to the story of marginalized individuals. Indeed, the tension between the wish to advocate for migrants, and the risks implied in this cultural operation have seldom been explored together and considered in their full ambivalences. However, I argue that it is precisely the study of this ambivalence that would allow a better understanding of the relations between agency and advocacy surrounding the current migratory debate in Europe.

More precisely, the central point of this study is to stress that the way in which Europe represents other people's migrations is still

imbued with binary distinctions between “us–Europeans” and “them–non-Europeans”, which constituted the rhetoric at the basis of colonial domination and exploitation, justified economic and social inequality and preserved the status quo of European power for centuries. Unveiling recurring patterns of representation, and acknowledging them, is therefore a precious chance to look at how Europe still imagines and portrays the ‘other’, especially the illegal one, arriving at the EU borders. Therefore, I argue that such investigation is a crucial step in order to take responsibility for the European role in the current geopolitical events, and in order to suggest possible paths to overcome the ethical difficulties implicated in the representation of the African migrant in the EU public sphere.

It cannot be denied that the growing body of visual, written and spatial narratives produced both in Italy and France over the last twenty years has progressively occupied a central space in the European everyday culture, becoming familiar to a wider part of citizens. However, I maintain that the location occupied by similar representations – which I have decided to name ‘the migrant’s corner’ – is problematic. Indeed, by this ambiguous phrase, which gives the title to my thesis, I designate the slippery ground on which these representations lay, and which constitutes an essential source of interest for analysing them within the context of the contemporary cultural production. On the one hand, I believe this ‘corner’ can be intended as a much-needed safe space in the Italian and French public sphere, explicitly devoted to recounting and defending the too-often marginalized position of African migrants in the current EU crisis, and their claims to the right to cross borders and the right to stay. From this angle, creating a dedicated corner to advocate for migrants’ rights is a civil duty, perceived as urgent by whoever already possesses a voice in the public cultural sphere. This has happened for instance with the recent documentaries *Fuocoammare* by Gianfranco Rosi (2015), *Human Flow* by Ai Weiwei (2017), *Sea Sorrow* by Vanessa Redgrave (2017) or

*Nulle part, en France* by Yolande Moreau (2016), all of which denounce the inefficacy and inhumanity of the recent EU immigration policies.

On the other hand, the term ‘corner’ suggests that these EU narratives contribute to relegating the agency of migrants to a marginal position, further excluding them from the political and cultural debate about their own stories. If these representations are crucial to keep the migrants’ rights in the spotlight of political discussion, they nonetheless appear insufficient to do justice to the Mediterranean journeys undertaken by people on the move. Indeed, what constantly appears to be lacking is the involvement of the migrant’s voice in the narrative, which is either absent or very limited in the elaboration of these cultural texts. The European gaze on these stories ultimately appears to reduce the migrant to a fixed, essentialized figure of contemporary times, stereotypically portrayed and ‘cornered’ as a victim of global mechanisms, without the possibility to intervene in the debate with his or her own experiences, aesthetic and artistic agency.

It is precisely the controversial nature of this specific production that justifies my choice of investigating the Italian and French representations, rather than direct testimonies of migrants and refugees. Because they are ambiguously located at the crossroads between social commitment and appropriation of the other’s story, the representations I will analyse embody the complex and elusive positioning of EU voices which advocate for migrant rights and a welcoming attitude towards mobility, while problematically remaining framed within a Eurocentric perspective.

Furthermore, looking at how the migrant’s journey is narrated in contemporary Europe should be regarded as an interesting and urgent task because it revives the crucial debate on the ethics of representability which has occupied philosophers in the post-Holocaust era. Is it possible to do justice to the other’s suffering through literary and artistic representations? Can such narratives impact the members of the public, by making them witness the other’s suffering via a text,

an image, a museum exhibition, a one-off event? In this thesis I will maintain that similar portrayals ambiguously function as “bridges” or as “walls” for communicating the migrant’s experience to the EU public.

In the first case, these representations function as bridges, as transitional narratives that make up for the silence surrounding the abuses of migrants’ rights at the doors of Europe. They bring the story of the migrant effectively closer and more tangibly in the public space and to the reader, the visitor, the spectator. This position sees the intervention of EU artists and intellectuals in the migration debate as a moral duty of witnessing which revives the role of literature and the arts as sites of dissent and social commitment. Telling the story of violence and injustice to contemporaries and future generations is morally mandatory, lest it be forgotten and erased from History. This is clearly the motivation for the authors, filmmakers, curators and organizers chosen as case studies for my discussion. Such artistic responses are born out of disagreement with national and EU pushback policies and aim at raising an awareness of the state of migrants’ rights in the era of global movement, exposing the injustices faced by individuals during their journey to Europe.

Conversely, another part of public opinion and academic enquiry looks with renewed suspicion at EU representations. Even for noble reasons of advocacy and testimony or solidarity, these narratives constitute an appropriation of ‘the other’s story’, as Colin Davis has underlined,<sup>26</sup> and are destined to fail to give justice to the protagonists who experienced it. As Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero has warned, ‘your story is never my story’, and it is unethical to assume otherwise, especially when trauma and violence are endured by the victim, but not by the witness.<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, these

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<sup>26</sup> Colin Davis, ‘Trauma and Ethics: Telling the Other’s Story’ in *Other People’s Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics* ed. by Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag (Oxford, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 19-41.

<sup>27</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 92.

representations symbolically act as “walls”, since they render the migrant’s story even more filtered and ultimately inaccessible, while reinforcing the power position of the witnesses and narrators rather than the victims of the injustice portrayed. These stories must therefore also be regarded critically, since they always re-construct, re-create the migrant’s point of view, but they are still authored from a European perspective, which often convey feelings of benevolence and pity towards the protagonists of such narratives. Thus, a paradox is reached: on the one hand the unacceptability of remaining silent in the face of the current episodes of injustice at the borders of Europe, and on the other, the difficulty of creating representations which witness those events while remaining ethical in their message, tone and purpose.

A notable exponent of the latter position is philosopher Slavoj Žižek. In *Against the Double Blackmail* (2016), Žižek criticizes the solidarity expressed by left-wing movements (whom he calls ‘left liberals’) in support of refugees’ and migrants’ rights, dismissing it as indulgent and hypocritical.<sup>28</sup> In his opinion, these positions conceal a “goody-goody” vision of global balances, which does not consider political or economic facts in the name of a generous solidarity with all of those who are coming to Europe, ignoring what he conceives as veritable cultural incompatibility between EU cultures and immigrants, especially Muslims. Reducing the debate to little-nuanced opposites, he then formulates the question: ‘what is to be done’ about the migratory “crisis” involving the EU? <sup>29</sup> At this point, he calls for a ‘radical economic change’ which would not only ‘abolish the conditions that create refugees’ but also alter today’s geopolitical balances bringing forward a new era of justice and wealth redistribution.<sup>30</sup> The very idealism he contested in the case of pro-immigrants left liberals is thus invoked to

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<sup>28</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with Neighbours* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

call for a communist revival able to dismantle global capitalism, in a scenario which is as utopian as calling for the dismantlement of EU borders itself. Much as it is necessary to recognize and oppose benevolent attitudes of universal pity towards migrants, resorting to accuse the *buonismo* appears also an easy strategy to attack those who are mobilizing in favour of welcoming displaced individuals.<sup>31</sup> With regards to the European artists and intellectuals mobilizing in support of migrants, the most urgent question seems not to be a general and vague ‘what is to be done?’, but rather ‘what is to be done in the meantime?’ Despite the clear limits of these European narratives of migration, they clearly raise the key question: what can be done or said, or shown to the public, to ethically promote a better understanding of current events?

By charting the underexplored area of the “migrant’s corner” and its complexities, this research will offer a more comprehensive and subtle understanding of the role that EU representations have played so far, and could play, in the debate on human mobility in the years to come.

## Thesis Outline

To highlight the pervasiveness of the representational patterns of migration stories in Europe, in this thesis I have chosen to adopt an interdisciplinary approach which spans literature, cinema, museums and festivals. Despite the clear differences between written, visual and spatial media that these cultural narratives utilize to convey information, all of them can be examined as ‘texts’, following Clifford Geertz’s famous ‘culture-as-text’ approach, which invites an inclusive,

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<sup>31</sup> See Federico Faloppa, ‘Buonisti o cattivisti? Meglio realisti’, *Associazione Carta di Roma*, 28 May 2015, [www.cartadiroma.org](http://www.cartadiroma.org), [accessed on 10 September 2018].

‘thick’ perspective to interpret the exchange between individuals in a community.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, without ignoring the specificity of each medium, this methodology can lead to a better insight into certain recurring tropes across a varied cultural production, revealing their inextricable link to an external perspective on the migrant’s story.

The choice to adopt a comparative approach is dictated by similar reasons. Throughout the thesis, I will consider both the cultural production of Italy and France in order to offer a wider perspective on European trends of representation. Both France and Italy have been deeply affected by the arrival of migrants from Africa over the last decades, albeit in different ways. In fact, over the last decades France as a continental nation has mainly functioned as a destination country for emigrants from Francophone Africa, and as a transit country for migrants trying to reach the UK from the border at Calais. Italy, on the other hand, has become a first arrival and transit country for migrants undertaking the Mediterranean crossing from North Africa. A first justification of my decision to use a comparative approach is that this will enable me to explore how these crucial differences have influenced the public perception of the migratory phenomenon in the two states, but also determined a different focus on certain aspects of the migrant’s story. Indeed, in the case of Italy, the cultural narratives produced over the last two decades insist on the Mediterranean crossing, while in the case of France they revolve around the marginal condition occupied by illegal migrants, especially in northern France.

At the same time, this comparison will be strategic for a second reason: the juxtaposition of the French and Italian cultural fields will illustrate that, despite their clear historical and social differences, in both cases we can observe the emergence of a European “gaze” onto the African migrant’s journey, which appears problematic, even while it reveals a desire to engage with contemporary issues of human rights

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<sup>32</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

violations. Indeed, with different artistic means and stylistic devices, these written, visual or spatial texts attempt to detach themselves from established media portrayals of migrants as victims or as threats to national security, trying to re-imagine the migratory experience in innovative and involving ways for the reader, the viewer, the visitor and the participant. Nonetheless, the impending risk is of falling into those representational traps which were being contested in the first place, allowing the resurfacing of stereotypes and filtered perspectives on the events narrated.

As countries with a markedly different location within Europe, distinctive colonial past and national evolutions, the two geographical areas taken into consideration will allow us to examine similar positionings and tropes in two different national contexts. Of course, similar cultural dynamics are at stake in other European states which are dealing with the arrival of migrants from African countries. Indeed, other countries could have been chosen as terms of comparison, for instance Greece, Spain, or Hungary. However, the cases of Italy and France appear to deserve special attention both for their role as major transit and destination countries for migrants in the EU, and for the worrying re-awakening of political conflicts over national identity, which has exposed the persistence of strong xenophobic and patriotic feelings in their public debate. These elements can be reasonably linked to the fact that, despite the call of many intellectuals, historians and activists, both Italy and France have struggled to include a postcolonial, plural approach in their national policies and institutional narratives. Indeed, in both cases, the lack of a critical re-appraisal of the nation's colonial past has meant that African immigrants, on the basis of their racial, linguistic and socio-cultural differences, are still viewed as foreign 'others' with no legitimate claims to cross European borders. Thus, focusing on two countries in which dehumanizing narratives of migration are particularly present in the public sphere appears as an urgent step to deconstruct the figure of the migrant as the stereotypical



‘other’ in the European context, starting from those very problematic representations advocating for migrants’ rights.

To investigate essential specificities and commonalities of contemporary Italian and French representations, I have divided my analysis into two parts and four chapters, which consider case studies issued from the two countries. For each context, I will highlight the unique features offered not only by the medium but also by the originality of the authorial and curatorial choices, reflecting to what extent they can be considered emblematic of more general trends. Each case study will, in fact, provide different strategies and answers to the complex task of bringing the migrant’s experience closer to the European public, advancing new readings of the significance of these journeys in the current global system, both for those who live them, and for those who witness them.

Part I “Borrowed gazes: recreating the migrant’s point of view” will consider the case of fictionalized renditions of migration stories and particularly the ways in which the moment of the migratory journey is narrated. The crucial feature shared by the works analysed in this part is the attempt to imagine the perspective of the migrant travelling and arriving to Europe, reproducing their experience of being rejected by the host society. Other fields of enquiry could have been adopted in this part. Indeed, the trends I will address feature in the greater part of the cultural production in EU today, including photography and theatre, which will not be analysed in this study. Much as these other areas could lead to similar conclusions, I have decided to focus on literature and cinema since they remain prominent art forms which are traditionally anchored to a concept of the individual author, particularly with reference to the potential for dissidence in comparison with mass media representations.

The writer and the filmmaker, still both auteurs especially in countries like France and Italy, are figures entrusted with social prestige, still seen as the intellectuals in society who are in a position to

defend counter-hegemonic stances, given their privileged location in cultural niches and traditions. Chapter 1 will examine three contemporary literary works addressing the Mediterranean crossings: the novels *Eldorado* by Laurent Gaudé (2006) and *Faire l'aventure* by Fabienne Kanor (2014), and the long poem *Solo andata* by Erri De Luca (2006). The rationale behind this selection is that these three texts engage with the figure of the *harrag*, the “border burner” who defies Europe’s borders by crossing them illegally. All the protagonists of the texts analysed in this chapter are dramatically or ironically depicted as heroic “border burners” facing dangerous and humiliating life experiences in the effort to reach and settle in Europe. Locating each case study in the context of its author’s different poetics, the first chapter will examine the complex effects of a European authorial voice that puts itself “into the migrant’s shoes” within the framework of the Italian and French literary tradition.

The second chapter will look at emblematic case studies of films relating the experiences of illegal migrants transiting across EU borders, focusing on the characterization of the migrant protagonist and on the trope of the encounter with EU characters and their receiving society. I will analyse Emanuele Crialese’s *Terraferma* (2011), Costa-Gavras’s *Éden à l’ouest* (2011) and finally Philippe Lioret’s *Welcome* (2009). Many films could have been included in this chapter, such as Andrea Segre’s *L’ordine delle cose* (2017), or Mahamat-Saleh Haroun’s *Une saison en France* (2017), both of which powerfully address the question of migrant hospitality in contemporary Europe. However, my choice was firstly dictated by the attention given in these films to the interaction between a displaced, undocumented individual and several European citizens whom s/he meets by chance, and which acquires markedly different connotations according to the stylistic and narrative treatment of the filmmaker. Secondly, my selection was made on the basis of crucial elements in these three films that efficiently illustrate the often-problematic consequences of the cinematic gaze cast by the European

director on the migrant's figure in the re-telling of his/her experiences on the screen.

While the first part of the thesis focuses on the individual authorial voices of writers and filmmakers re-imagining the subjective experience of a migrant protagonist, the second part entitled "Exhibiting and Performing Communities" engages with the collective narratives hosted and negotiated within museums and during festivals. Focusing on the representation of migratory journeys in conjunction with performative aspects of display and *mise en scène*, the last two chapters explore the possibility for institutions and public spaces to host narratives of dissent towards EU migratory policies. For this part I have chosen the areas of museums and festivals to investigate the potential offered by collective, rather than individual, representations. Both as spaces and narratives, the museum and the festival create a dimension of community since they originate from the collective efforts of curatorial and organizational teams respectively, and they function essentially thanks to the public: the visitor and the participant. They are therefore crucial sites to explore the narratives that are being reshaped around and about migration in the public sphere of France and Italy.

Chapter 3 will compare two migration museums, the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration in Paris and the gallery Memoria e Migrazioni at Museo Galata in Genoa, focusing on issues of context, framing and plurality. In the case of museums too, other examples could have been considered: for instance, in the Italian context, a unique example of counter-hegemonic migration museum is represented by Porto M, a collection of objects rescued from the sea by members of the Askavusa association in Lampedusa, which invites visitors to reflect on the experience of the Mediterranean crossing.<sup>33</sup> This collective, work-

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<sup>33</sup> Federica Mazzara, 'Objects, Debris and Memory of the Mediterranean Passage: Porto M in Lampedusa', in *Border Lampedusa: Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land*, ed. by Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 153-73.

in-progress installation challenges the traditional idea of the museum as an ordered exhibition by gathering casual debris into a rescued “archive” that might preserve the fragments of nameless migration stories. Although projects such as Porto M are fundamental contributions to the exploration of alternative approaches to collective narratives in the public space, my priority in this chapter was instead to focus on analysing the institutional narratives on contemporary migration as they are showcased to the public in state or municipal buildings. Indeed, the two case-studies have been chosen since they are extremely telling of the need, felt by governments worldwide, of creating official narratives on national identity and migration for the public space. With their differences, they both exemplify the challenges of creating shared narratives on contemporary mobility within the traditional setting of the museum, an institution which has undergone profound changes over the last fifty years.

Chapter 4, as the last body chapter, will examine the emerging corpus of festivals dedicated to contemporary migration. The recent field of festival studies will illuminate the significance of the chosen examples, with particular reference to the notion of performance and its relation to new forms of collectivity in the digital global era. I will focus on the case study of LampedusaInFestival on the island of Lampedusa, which was held regularly between 2009 and 2015, and of Welcome!, a one-off event hosted in 2017 at the Musée National de l’Histoire de l’Immigration. Finally, the conclusion will make sense of the differences and similarities encountered in the variety of my case studies, explore the key implications of my findings and briefly illustrate the considerable potential for future developments in this field of academic enquiry.

Therefore, the thesis will itself follow a principle of “opening up” from individual narratives of solitary itineraries of migration, and move progressively towards more inclusive and plural representations which attempt to involve and to create “community” on the basis of freedom

of movement and transnational solidarity. Such a varied current production calls for further critical attention to illuminate the intricacies of positioning, advocacy and ethics of European gazes onto Mediterranean mobility, and to advance possible solutions to envision more inclusive narratives of contemporary events. As already mentioned, despite the pervasiveness of EU narratives of African migration across the Mediterranean, these representations have rarely been analysed in a comprehensive and interdisciplinary study which mainly revolves around issues of authorship and agency. My thesis will certainly not be an exhaustive examination, but a first attempt to redress this gap in the academic research on the role of European cultural narratives in the migration debate, bringing together recurring tropes and representational ambiguities. Nonetheless, since the beginning of my doctoral research dozens of films, novels and cultural projects have engaged with the current migratory events in Europe. Therefore, a comprehensive study would also be impossible to produce because of the recent and still ongoing nature of the cultural production I am addressing in this work.

A legitimate counter-argument to my choice of focusing on European representations is: should it not be a priority to analyse migrants' self-representations as direct, primary voices, instead of EU perspectives? Is it not counter-productive to focus on European voices to highlight their inevitably indirect and "external" point of view on the migration stories they present? Much as this would be an intuitive perspective to adopt, the scarcity of migrant narratives in the European cultural landscape remains a major obstacle. How much agency do migrants, especially illegal and 'unwanted' ones, have in the EU public sphere? What channels are available to them, to express their claims and tell their own stories? Not only do migrants seem to lack what

Judith Butler has called the ‘right to appear’<sup>34</sup> – the ability to gather legitimately in the public space and reclaim rights – but, also, concerning their access to media which would enable them to relate more directly their own story, they seem deprived of the ‘right to look’, to quote an influential work by visual scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff.<sup>35</sup> The right to look is the possibility for the subaltern ‘other’ to share one’s perspective in response to the constant hegemonic gaze to which they are constantly exposed, in colonial and neocolonial settings. Indeed, the direct voices of the protagonists of contemporary migrations are seldom heard in the public sphere, to the point that their agency appears absent or invisible.

In fact, cases of self-representations of migrants in the arts still amount to a few examples in the Italian and French context, to the point that they appear as isolated exceptions in a corpus dominated by European authors and artists. A notable case in Italy is the work of Ethiopian filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer, who directed several works such as the short film *Asmat - Nomi* (Names, 2015) and *Soltanto il mare* (Nothing But The Sea, 2011), co-directed with Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barraco. In the literary context, numerous reportages and real-life accounts have been co-authored by migrants and European writers, such as *Nel mare ci sono i coccodrilli* by Enaiyatollah Akbari and Fabio Geda (2010) and *Dem ak xabaar/partir et raconter* by Mahmoud Traoré and Bruno Le Dantec (2016).<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the great majority of artistic and public representations of current mobilities to Europe are still narrated from a European perspective, or from the perspective of hybrid or second-generation authors, who have not experienced the migratory journey themselves. While self-representations and co-authored works

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<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 24-64.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Other examples of co-authored texts published in French are discussed in Catherine Mazauric, *Mobilités d’Afrique en Europe* (Paris: Karthala, 2012).

must be acknowledged as a growing corpus of vital testimonies of Mediterranean crossings, the primary concern of this thesis is to focus on works authored from a European point of view precisely because they function as ideal case studies to explore the ambiguities of the migrant's corner in the Italian and French public spheres.

Another problematic issue is the nature of the cultural industry in Europe. As Sandra Ponzanesi has convincingly examined, much of what is being produced as "authentic" migrant and postcolonial voices should be investigated with scepticism, because these works often respond to a market trend which is based on exoticism and cosmopolitanism.<sup>37</sup> Talking about migration has also become a trend, a branding. Extremely diverse authors have engaged with migration over the last twenty years, to the point that the risks of fashion and commodification certainly arise. The absence or tokenistic use of migrant voices is also due to the excessive recentness of the events experienced by migrants, and it is very likely that more spontaneous direct testimonies will enter the public space over the next decade. However, while migrant voices emerge, the priority seems to remain that of investigating the nature of those European narratives which are dominating the public sphere of Italy and France. How can these representations of the African migrant's story be interpreted in the meantime?

Cultural representations nourish people's everyday life in society. Far from being incidental to the ways in which migration is thought of and perceived, they lie at the core of the debate, since culture remains today a privileged field through which narratives in favour of, or against immigration to Europe can be communicated to the members of society. It is through these cultural representations - be they in the press, on the screen, on the page, or in the gallery - that

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<sup>37</sup> Sandra Ponzanesi, *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). See also Huggan, Graham, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

concepts of community, difference, inequality are created, shaped, reinforced, legitimised. Indeed, it is the ambivalence between the advocacy and appropriation of such portrayals that creates the problematic “corner” which the migrant story appears to occupy in the EU public space today. Much as this ambiguity seems destined to remain an impasse, in this thesis I argue that it is possible, and indeed urgent, to initiate a more comprehensive and focused discussion about who is representing migration stories today, and how, often in the absence of the migrants' direct voices in the debate.

### **Migrants, "We" and the Multiplying Borders of Fortress Europe**

Before introducing the main theoretical issues converging on the cultural representation of contemporary migration to Europe, it is necessary to define some key terms which have increasingly appeared pivotal in the so-called Mediterranean “migration crisis” of the 2000s and 2010s. As stressed in the collective work edited by Nicholas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra and John Pickles, a reflection on the words used to refer to the contemporary migratory phenomenon, and attempting to problematise them by understanding their controversial implications, is essential in order to expose the political rhetoric of the current debate, especially when it comes to the conservative discourse of the EU border regime.<sup>38</sup> The brief overview that follows revolves around the protagonists of such Mediterranean journeys, the role of European voices in these stories, and the borders faced by migrants at the outskirts of Europe.

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<sup>38</sup> Nicholas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra and John Pickles (eds.), ‘New Keywords: Migration and Borders’, *Cultural Studies*, 29.1 (2015), 55–87. See also the publication of a second collective work: Nicholas De Genova, Martina Tazzioli and Soledad Álvarez-Velasco (eds.), ‘Europe/Crisis: New Keywords of “the Crisis” in and of “Europe”’, *Near Futures Online*, 1 (2016), 1–45, which focuses on the controversial use of other crucial terms such as ‘crisis’ and ‘Europe’.



The first urgent question to ask when investigating current mobility to the EU is: who is a migrant? How is s/he defined today?<sup>39</sup> Just like in the case of the word “crisis”, when it comes to the protagonists of migration the issue of terminology is extremely ambiguous and yet highly politicised.<sup>40</sup> In the public debate, a fundamental distinction is often operated between refugees and asylum seekers, who, respectively, have received or are attempting to receive asylum, and the so-called “economic migrants”, who try to reach Europe to find better life opportunities but would not qualify for international protection as they are technically not fleeing war or persecution, which is the crucial element that decrees the right to asylum according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in the last decade, forced migration has been considered as the only legitimate case in which displaced individuals should be assisted and welcomed to Europe, while non-forced migrants are frequently labelled as illegal, unauthorised or irregular.<sup>42</sup> Such a distinction, I argue, is misleading, and indeed unethical, for a number of reasons.

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<sup>39</sup> Although women constitute almost half of the migrant population in the world and face a greater degree of abuses and violence – especially sexual violence and exploitation –, their stories remain even more underrepresented than those of male migrants. Their stories and the problematic marginality of their agency in the EU public sphere deserve a separate treatment, and therefore will not be included in the present thesis, which is preoccupied with the analysis of the available representations of migrants issued from a EU perspective, the majority of which focuses on male protagonists (<https://www.iom.int/gender-and-migration> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

<sup>40</sup> Arab news company Al Jazeera, for example, decided to abandon the term migrant to describe the protagonists of Mediterranean journeys and shipwrecks in the summer of 2015, underlining how most of them would technically qualify for international protection, and adopted the term refugee and asylum seeker instead (see Barry Malone, ‘Why Al Jazeera will not say Mediterranean ‘migrants’, *Al Jazeera*, 20 August 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/editors-blog/2015/08/al-jazeera-mediterranean-migrants-150820082226309.html> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

<sup>41</sup> UN Refugee Agency, ‘What is a Refugee?’, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>42</sup> Dimitris Papadopoulos, Dimitris Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos (eds.), *Escape Routes: Control and subversion in the XXI century* (London: Pluto Press, 2008). See also Nicholas De Genova (ed.), *The Borders of “Europe”: Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2017).

Firstly, it contributes to a prevailing depiction of the migrant as a victim of circumstances, a subject to be rescued and assisted, on the basis of a humanitarian imperative which has been the object of criticism within international cooperation in the past decades.<sup>43</sup> As previously discussed with regard to Chouliaraki's reflections, this type of humanitarian discourse is articulated within a framework of pity that seldom addresses the root causes of migration towards Europe, and too often evokes that "white saviour complex" so common in the field of international cooperation and development.<sup>44</sup> Yet, it is this image of helpless migrants dependent on Western help that has dominated the European debate, still currently polarised around deserving refugees and "bogus" asylum seekers.

Secondly, the stress on the supposed desperation of the migrant subject, frequently advanced by mainstream media, alters the significance of a journey, which, conversely, is often a concrete way to address economic, social and juridical inequalities. Such established representations of migrants as mere "suffering others" seem to dismiss any form of agency on their part, omitting the active role they reclaim

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<sup>43</sup> The long-standing debate on the use of the terms 'migrant', 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' in the public discourse is retraced in Katy Long, 'When Refugees Stopped Being Migrants: Movement, Labour and Humanitarian Protection', *Migration Studies*, 1.1 (2013), 4-26. For the use of such labels in media discourse, see Aidan White, 'Covering Migration: Why 'Refugees and Migrants' are People Who Go Together', *Ethical Journalism Network*, 28 August 2015, <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/covering-the-migration-story-why-refugees-and-migrants-go-together> [accessed 10 September 2018]. The humanitarian and post-humanitarian attitudes towards migrants and refugees are criticised in Lilie Chouliaraki, 'Between Pity and Irony: Paradigms of Refugee Representations in Humanitarian Discourse' in *Migrations and the Media: Global Crises and the Media*, ed. by Kerry Moore, Bernhard Gross, Terry Threadgold (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 13-34. For a critique of media representations of 'others', see Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality: on the Rise of Mediapolis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). See also Paolo Cuttitta, 'Humanitarianism and Migration in the Mediterranean borderscape' in *Borderscapes: Imaginations and Practices of Bordermaking*, ed. by Chiara Brambilla et al. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 131-39.

<sup>44</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki, 'Between Pity and Irony', p. 13. On the "white saviour complex", see Katherine E. Bell, 'Raising Africa?: Celebrity and the Rhetoric of the White Saviour', *PORTAL*, 10.1 (2013), 1-24 and Shari Daya, 'Saving the Other: Exploring the social in social enterprise', *Geolocal*, 57 (2014), 120-28.

precisely through their voyage. Indeed, they fail to show non-forced migration as a political attempt on the part of Sub-Saharan and North African migrants to challenge global inequality by claiming the right to opportunities of personal development, in particular employment and education. As migration expert Hein De Haas reminds us, forced and voluntary are ‘dichotomous and simplistic’ categories, which tell only part of the migrant’s story.<sup>45</sup> Referring to Amartya Sen’s capability approach, De Haas underlines the need to adopt an alternative perspective to make sense of contemporary Mediterranean journeys that should start not with Europe’s role in it, but with a focus on the protagonists of these stories, their aspirations and abilities.<sup>46</sup> The motivations of migrants to attempt to live a sustainable and fulfilling life should indeed be good enough reasons for Europe to legitimize these migratory itineraries and help re-think the way migration is discussed in the public sphere. However, it is clear that this right is not recognised to the inhabitants of less developed countries. The ability to move freely, as Zygmunt Bauman has underlined, has increasingly become a privilege of the few members of rich elites, while thousands are stranded at the borders of Western countries, forced into what Jørgen Carling has called an ‘involuntary immobility’ marked by the lack of resources and documents to start, or continue, their journey.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the issue of the migrant’s agency, rarely kept in consideration in media representations, is at the basis of the concept of the ‘autonomy of migration’, which calls for greater emphasis on the subjectivity of migrants in their struggles to cross borders and remain in Europe, rather than on the border regimes put in place by states to hinder such

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<sup>45</sup> Hein de Haas, ‘Migration Theory: Quo Vadis?’, *IMI Working Papers Series*, 100 (2014), 4-39, (p. 23).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Jørgen Carling, ‘Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28.1 (2010), 5-42.

movement.<sup>48</sup> The adoption of such a new perspective is a shared feature of many movements reclaiming the right of displaced people to choose where to resettle, in contrast with the much-contested EU Dublin regulations which determine that asylum seekers must apply for international protection in their first arrival country in Europe. Thus, highlighting the right to cross national boundaries has become a central element in the attempt to redress dehumanizing and stereotyped narratives of people on the move towards Europe.

Thirdly, the labels used to define the protagonists of these journeys fail to do justice to each individual itinerary of migration. What about those who fail to demonstrate their right to receive international protection? And what about those who die in the attempt? What about the “poverty refugees” who flee lack of future perspectives, and desire to improve their living conditions, or those who flee their country for fear of persecution due to their sexual identity or orientation?<sup>49</sup> The majority of African migrants, during their journey to Europe, are relegated to inhabit a legal grey area. Even when they are fleeing from poverty and persecution, some of them would not pass the examination of the UNHCR to be granted asylum because they would be unable to prove it to the asylum commission. Indeed, juridical and institutional definitions appear insufficient to describe the multifaceted causes determining migratory journeys. At the same time, much as labels need to be challenged and questioned, it must be remembered

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<sup>48</sup> See Sandro Mezzadra, ‘The Gaze of Autonomy: Capitalism, Migration, and Social Struggles’, in *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, ed. by Vicki Squire (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 121–42, and Nicholas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra and John Pickles (eds.), ‘New Keywords: Migration and Borders’, *Cultural Studies*, 29.1 (2015), 55–87.

<sup>49</sup> The case of individuals who have left their country for fear of persecution due to their sexual identity is emblematic in that it exposes the arbitrariness of the process granting asylum: on what basis can the validity of a LGBTQ migrant be ascertained by the examining committee? See for instance Debora Singer, ‘How do you prove you are gay? A culture of disbelief is traumatising asylum seekers’, *Guardian*, 24 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/24/gay-asylum-seekers-sexuality-home-office> [accessed 10 September 2018] and Senthoran Raj, ‘A/Effective Adjudications: Queer Refugees and the Law’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 38.4 (2017), 453–68.

that they remain responsible for how migration is conceptualized in the media and the political debate, and in this sense, they can determine the tightening or relaxation of immigration policies, and the failure or success of these journeys to Europe.

To expose the limits of such definitions, I have adopted the term “migrant” throughout the thesis, and “refugee” as a subcategory of migrant to indicate the experience of those who have formally received the UNHCR asylum protection. Following the definition of IOM, “migrant” will be used to indicate ‘any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person’s legal status; whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; what the causes for the movement are; or what the length of the stay is’.<sup>50</sup> Besides allowing for a greater flexibility to include a variety of case studies, this choice is also dictated by the desire to legitimate each individual journey by focusing on the act, whether forced or voluntary, legal or “illegal”, to leave one’s country to travel elsewhere. Indeed, the use of the umbrella term “migrant” here is not intended to dismiss the individuals’ right to international protection, but rather to oppose a mechanism that seems to legitimise international movement only when this is a “life or death” matter. This choice is also an invitation to regard the act of migrating not only as a necessity imposed by political and social circumstances, but primarily as the act of reclaiming the freedom of movement as a fundamental human right.

Sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago has denounced that migrants - especially unauthorized ones - have increasingly been subjected to a process of dehumanization which reduces them to ‘non-persons’, separated from the community of citizens in Western countries.<sup>51</sup> For

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<sup>50</sup> International Organization for Migration, ‘Who is a Migrant?’, 4 April 2016, <http://weblog.iom.int/who-migrant> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>51</sup> Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-persone: L’esclusione dei migranti in una società globale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999).

this reason, the way in which migrants are defined in the political and cultural debate remains of crucial importance. Labels such as ‘undocumented’, ‘illegal’ are not neutral definitions, but should be read as political definitions used by conservative rhetoric to depict African migrants as “others” from the Western community, and to stress the illegitimacy of their claims to have a right to stay and to belong in Europe. As De Genova underlined in 2002, these problematic terms should be referred to in quotes, so as to ‘denaturalize the reification’ that they imply.<sup>52</sup> The concept of “illegality”, in particular, needs to be theoretically deconstructed and re-interpreted as a category created by state authorities that not only defines, but primarily produces and legitimises the idea of an unauthorized movement of people across borders.

Far from being a new phenomenon, this othering process has deep roots in the racist and divisive mentality that allowed for the development of European colonialism in Africa, the same that justified expansionism and the domination of native people in the colonies.<sup>53</sup> However, the migrant today is primarily othered on the basis of his or her unprivileged economic and social condition, and therefore seen either as a burden, or as a temporarily exploitable labour force, in capitalist and utilitarian mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from the national borders. Bauman refers to this group of people as ‘human waste’: undesirable and unskilled people who inhabit a subaltern condition of rightlessness and can be repatriated any time.<sup>54</sup> Although the figures of illegal migrants are a consistent minority of the migrant population worldwide and of that directed to Europe<sup>55</sup>, they appear

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<sup>52</sup> Nicholas De Genova, ‘Migrant Illegality and deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31 (2002), 419-47 (p. 420).

<sup>53</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982).

<sup>54</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas De Genova, ‘The ‘Migrant Crisis’ as Racial Crisis: Do *Black Lives Matter* in Europe?’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41.10 (2018), 1765-82.

particularly emblematic of the increasing restrictions concerning citizenship and immigration law in Europe.

Journalist Robert Winder has famously affirmed that: ‘we are all immigrants, it simply depends how far back you go’.<sup>56</sup> The fact that mobility has always been the rule rather than the exception in human history seems to be forgotten in a political discourse that thrives on social divisions and creates easy boundaries between ‘we’ and ‘others’. However, another crucial term to clarify is precisely that “we”. If migrants are the others *par excellence* in contemporary Europe, who do we talk about when we use “we”? The use of this pronoun needs to be carefully considered for the purpose of my analysis. Of course, the use made by artists and activists in contemporary Europe refers to the existence of a plurality of subjects who do not recognize themselves in the current immigration policies and call for a renewed sense of solidarity on the part of this collective identity in support of migrants’ rights. For instance, this is the sense attributed to the pronoun ‘nous’ (we) in the Appel des 800: ‘Aujourd’hui nous avons décidé de prendre la parole tous ensemble pour dire non’.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, the ‘we’ refers precisely to the community of filmmakers and public figures who are contesting the French management of the border area in Calais.

However, as Susan Sontag has famously argued, ‘no “we” can be taken for granted’ when discussing issues of witnessing and advocacy.<sup>58</sup> Although she was referring to the fact that viewing suffering does not necessarily cause an empathic reaction or action in the witness, her warning is also useful, in the context of my research, to reflect on the complex dynamics between the victim, his/her story and his/her advocate. Indeed, the pronoun used by those who view the other's suffering is too often exclusive, as it designates the privileged

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain* (London: Abacus, 2005), p. ix.

<sup>57</sup> Libération, ‘Appel des 800’.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 6.

positioning of the witnesses who are seldom affected by the injustice they are observing. In these cases, the pronoun "excludes" the community of migrants from the group of speakers or writers asking for better living conditions for them. In fact, some appeals and manifestos in support of migrants contribute to marking an ever more exacerbated distinction by "them-African migrants-voiceless" and "us-Europeans-able to speak" and, despite the noble intentions, do not succeed in challenging this separation.

Yet, the fascinating aspect of the second-person plural pronoun is that, in English as in Italian and French, it can be either exclusive or inclusive, thus excluding or including other subjects in the utterance of the communicative act. While the 'Appel des 800' contained a clear separation between the supporters of migrants and ultimately migrants themselves, other cultural texts such as the 'Migrant Manifesto' quoted in the epigraph on page 17, use the pronoun inclusively: 'we have the right to move [...] we demand the same privileges [...]'.<sup>59</sup> In similar cases, the union of supporters and migrants themselves in a community is made explicit, be it only as a shared goal yet to be reached through social mobilization and cultural activism. This is not only because immigrants were directly involved in the drafting of the document, starting from Cuban-born Tania Bruguera, who has resettled in the United States, but because migrants, *together* with the members of the host society advocating for migrants' rights, all identify themselves with the protection of the right to move and the right to stay as inalienable human rights which are abused daily by the border regimes of Western countries.

It is on the ambiguity between an exclusive or inclusive use of "we" that the cultural representations chosen for this thesis are located. The ability to raise one's voice in the public sphere to reclaim social

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<sup>59</sup> Immigrant Movement International, 'Migrant Manifesto', <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/migrant-manifesto/> [accessed 10 September 2018].



justice is still too often the prerogative of European citizens, suggesting that the “we” primarily refers to those who are exempt from the dehumanizing effects of state borders. Much as the written, visual or spatial narratives examined in the following chapters attempt to bridge over between non-migrants and migrants, their problematic location in terms of authorial voice will show the challenges of reaching an actual level of inclusiveness in the present historical moment.

With regard to the complex relationship between “we-Europeans” and “them-non-European migrants”, it is necessary to clarify the use of two other essential and yet controversial terms which concern the attitude and the response generated in EU citizens by the witnessing of the hardship experienced by displaced individuals: these are humanitarianism and empathy.

As discussed earlier in this introduction, the use of the term ‘humanitarianism’ has increasingly acquired a negative connotation in the context of contemporary migration, shifting from a neutral designation of the aid sector of NGOs and governments, to that of a hegemonic narrative of benevolence often detectable in the attitudes and actions of European institutions towards migrant subjects. When the normalised, mainstream occurrence of such representational tropes is considered, deconstructing the patterns of the humanitarian discourse appears necessary not only to oppose the portrayal of displaced people as powerless individuals, but also to grasp the instrumental role of such a discourse in the contemporary rhetoric of security. As Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli have argued, humanitarian actions aimed at rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean Sea have progressively blurred their boundaries with security operations intending to monitor, prevent and criminalise human mobility between Africa and Europe.<sup>60</sup> In fact, Garelli and Tazzioli

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<sup>60</sup> See Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, ‘The Humanitarian War Against Migrant Smugglers at Sea’, *Antipode*, 50.3 (2018), 685-703. Other useful reflections on humanitarianism in the Mediterranean context can be found in Nina Perkowski,

identify a veritable ‘military-humanitarian nexus’ in the governmental policies deployed by EU states and international bodies to respond to the Mediterranean “crisis” of the last decade. Thus, throughout the thesis, my use of the term ‘humanitarianism’ will bear in mind such controversial nuances of the humanitarian discourse, attempting to detect its inevitable influence on the cultural representations analysed in the different chapters, and to explore the emergence of alternative portrayals that challenge such disempowering and hegemonic gazes onto the migrant’s story.

Because the corpus of texts chosen as case studies aims primarily at advocating for migrants’ rights, a brief reflection is then needed on the terms indicating the feelings that these works hope to evoke in their public. Due to their attempt to humanise the figure of the displaced individuals in contrast with the victimising depiction contained in mainstream media, most of the selected texts will seek to generate empathy, rather than pity, in their readers, spectators and visitors. Indeed, the difference between the two concepts is complex and yet crucial in this migratory setting. Pity, as discussed above in the context of the humanitarian discourse, can be interpreted as a feeling that centres on the distress felt by the witness for the suffering subject, without challenging the power relations between the two. Empathy, on the other hand, is typically regarded as the ability of the witnesses to feel and understand the experiences of the sufferers by sharing their emotions and, ideally, changing view in their favour.<sup>61</sup> However, as Shu-

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‘Deaths, Interventions, Humanitarianism and Human Rights in the Mediterranean ‘Migration Crisis’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 21.2 (2016), 331-35. See also the discussion on the phrase ‘humanitarian crisis’ in De Genova, Tazzioli and Álvarez-Velasco (eds.), ‘Europe/Crisis: New Keywords’, 25-28.

<sup>61</sup> Shu-hua Yang, ‘Empathy in Intercultural Communication’, <http://www.wjxvtc.cn/picture/article/42/11/00/a547c19f47ce8324dde634d9bff5/6f9e1029-bb40-4827-b34a-7a79ca366885.doc> [accessed 10 May 2019]. For a reflection on the complexity of defining empathy in the context of contemporary global migrations, see Joshua F. Hoops and Keli Braitman, ‘The Influence of Immigration Terminology on Attribution and Empathy’, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 16.2 (2019), 149-61.

hua Yang has underlined, empathy as a fundamental element in intercultural communication is a multi-faceted process based on cognitive, linguistic and affective competences, that requires time and intention, in order to become an effective means to challenge pre-established opinions.<sup>62</sup> In fact, also empathy, just like pity, is riddled with complexities: the possibility of feeling empathic towards other people's suffering, as Yang continues, is often hindered by personal perspectives and sedimented stereotypes of the subjects involved in the communication, which not only inevitably interfere with a full understanding of the other's positioning, but also oppose resistance to a change of attitude.<sup>63</sup> Along the same lines, Carolyn Pedwell stresses how empathy is a process imbued in power relations, since it still appears to be the prerogative of Western gaze directed at the story of subaltern individuals.<sup>64</sup> As I will attempt to illustrate in the following chapters, even when artistic representations call for the reader, the spectator or the visitor to feel empathy for the migrant's predicament, the socio-cultural and experiential background of their European witnesses risks rendering this identification always incomplete, since it is constantly filtered by a subjective understanding and interpretation of the other's story.

Similar concerns were expressed by Sontag, who famously claimed that the fact of witnessing other people's hardship, and even experiencing feelings of empathy for them, does not automatically guarantee that an action in solidarity with their cause will ensue.<sup>65</sup> Even when the cultural and artistic representations of migratory journeys succeed in involving citizens by making them identify with the

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<sup>62</sup> Yang, 'Empathy in Intercultural Communication', p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> See Carolyn Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014); 'Decolonizing Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally', *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 16.1 (2016), 27-49 and Sneja Gunew, 'Subaltern Empathy: Beyond European Categories in Affect Theory', *Concentric: Literacy and Cultural Studies*, 35.1 (2009), 11-30.

<sup>65</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

migrant's perspective, it cannot be assumed that their attitude in real life will concretely change from indifference to active political engagement. The limits of empathy as a concept, thus, must indeed be kept into consideration for the case studies examined in this thesis, since even the most acclaimed and involving cultural ones appear to face the constant risk of failing to turn such feeling into actions of solidarity with migrant communities.

One last key term to be defined for the present study is the border. This pivotal element of European geography has stimulated a rich debate around its significance for citizens. One only has to think of the wall separating the West Bank from Israel, or the fences dividing Mexico from the US, to understand how borders have rapidly multiplied since the end of the 1990s. Although Europe abolished border controls with the Schengen agreement, the softening of internal borders between member states was compensated for by a tightening of the union's external boundaries.<sup>66</sup> This process worsened between 2015 and 2016, with a record of Mediterranean crossings from Africa and the Middle East caused by the Syrian war and the effects of the Arab Springs, but also by the increased profit generated by human trafficking in Libya. Indeed, the summer of 2015 saw the peak of the rhetoric of "crisis" circulating in the media and political debate, which repeatedly suggested the image of a migrant "invasion". States such as Croatia, Serbia and Hungary created new checkpoints and barriers to prevent migrants' and refugees' entry into their territory. The borders between Ventimiglia and Menton, and Calais and Dover, have progressively been reinforced, becoming no man's lands for undocumented individuals caught in a bureaucratic limbo. Finally, a different case is represented by the liquid border of the Mediterranean Sea. This is indeed, in Lorenzo Rinelli's words, the 'ultimate frontier' of contemporary

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<sup>66</sup> Regarding the increasing patrolling of external borders in Europe, and the rising criminalisation of border crossers, see also Claire Rodier, *Xénophobie business: à quoi servent les contrôles migratoires?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012).

Europe,<sup>67</sup> not only because it works as the primary access from Africa, but also because, by constituting the world's deadliest passage for migrants, it tragically re-ignites the colonial and neo-colonial relationships between the two continents.<sup>68</sup>

The hostility of such a geopolitical context to migrants is often described in the press and by activists with the critical term of "Fortress Europe" which condemns the attitude of closure of the European Union towards non-EU citizens and its resemblance to a fortified, impenetrable area aimed at excluding displaced individuals from physically accessing the EU and from benefitting from its welfare policies. The popularity of this expression has increased from the late 1990s until today,<sup>69</sup> becoming part of the everyday language and giving its name to many artistic and activist interventions. For instance, 'Fortress Europe' is the name of an internationally-renowned blog by journalist Gabriele Del Grande, who was among the first researchers to compile a list of the migrants dead or missing in the borderlands of Europe.<sup>70</sup> However, already in 2003 it also gave the name to a song by Asian Dub Foundation, and to an opera composed by Calliope Tsoupaki and staged by Floris Visser at the Dutch National Opera in 2017, just to mention a few examples. In fact, besides describing the reality of an increasingly bordered continent, Fortress Europe also suggests the presence of an actual "war" being fought by national authorities against irregular migrants.

Anthropologist Michel Agier defines the border as 'a place, a situation or a moment that ritualizes the relationship to the other'.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Lorenzo Rinelli, *African Migrants and Europe: Managing the Ultimate Frontier* (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Dominic Thomas, 'The Global Mediterranean: Literature and Migration', *Yale French Studies*, 120 (2011), 140-153.

<sup>69</sup> See Saskia Sassen, *Migranten, Siedler, Flüchtlinge: Von der Massenauswanderung zur Festung Europa* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1996).

<sup>70</sup> Gabriele Del Grande, 'Fortress Europe', <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>71</sup> Michel Agier, *Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), p. 7.

Borders are clearly not just geographical limits, but human boundaries arbitrarily established to determine who is “in” and who is “out” of an established human community.<sup>72</sup> In the era of “Fortress Europe”, in which national borders are re-erected and fortified, being able to identify a threatening other seems also an easy stratagem for identifying a sense of “we”. Much as all human stories are substantially marked by the constant movement of people between nations, being a migrant today means inhabiting and embodying the condition of the marginalized, of the outsider in everyday life, and being excluded from full citizenship, and consequently often from human rights. Étienne Balibar has pointed out that immigration has replaced race as the determining factor for new forms of racism, which he called ‘neo-racism’.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the border seems to mark the passage of migrants into marginalization, not only on the basis of ethnic background, but increasingly for the mere fact of being immigrants, especially when they come from poorer countries. Borders still mark unchanged inequalities between the global North and the global South, detectable for instance in the deals between Italy and Libya, first between Berlusconi and Khadafi in 2008 to prevent the departure of illegal migrants from North Africa, and then more recently with the newly elected governments.<sup>74</sup> However, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have underlined how borders are also essential devices for today’s globalised economy, since

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<sup>72</sup> See Jeremy Harding, *Border Vigils: Keeping Migrants Out of the Rich World* (London: Verso, 2012); Michel Agier, *Borderlands*; Matthew Carr, *Fortress Europe: Dispatches from a Gated Continent* (New York: New Press, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> Étienne Balibar, ‘Is there a neo-racism?’ in *Race, Nation and Class: Ambiguous Identities* ed. by Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>74</sup> The neo-colonial imbalances between Northern Africa and former colonisers is poignantly described in Andrea Segre’s film *L’ordine delle cose* (2018) and previously discussed in Chiara Brambilla, ‘Shifting Italy/Libya Borderscapes at the Interface of EU/Africa Borderland: A ‘Genealogical’ Outlook from the Colonial Era to Post-Colonial Scenarios’, *ACME*, 13.2 (2014), 196-219. Concerning the colonial legacy of France in Africa and the rise of dictatorships sustained by Western countries, see Cécile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: the Aesthetics of Tyranny* (London: Legenda, 2014) and Aminata Traoré, *L’Afrique humiliée* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

they filter cheap and undocumented labour, who will then be employed as rightless and easily disposable workers in Western economies.<sup>75</sup> These recent trends in border studies help decidedly to conceptualize geographical boundaries as symbols and symptoms of how social relations are articulated on the basis of exploitation and violation in the globalised world.

Other key thinkers of border functioning have focused on the deadly effect of the mechanism of border control on the lives of migrants. According to Joseph Pugliese, the frontiers of contemporary Europe have transformed into veritable 'zones of the dead', signalling an explicit refusal of Western countries to include the inhabitants of the global South into their communities.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, as Gabriele Del Grande has argued, EU borders are responsible for thousands of deaths each year, and this alarming toll does not cease to increase. These 'violent' borders<sup>77</sup> have transformed into the tangible proof of EU's 'necropolitics', a term which for Achille Mbembe, describes the tendency of state authorities to dispose of the life of individuals, by controlling and filtering their ability to act and move across territories.<sup>78</sup> However, such a drift towards vulnerability in the face of state power goes beyond the embodied experience of illegal migrants, because it affects all those individuals who still today inhabit a precarious condition in different parts of the world: women, persecuted minorities, exploited workers. One only has to think of the plea of second-generation immigrants in Italy, who for decades have unsuccessfully campaigned against the law of *jus sanguinis*, or of the deportation risk experienced by the members of the Windrush generation in the UK of

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<sup>75</sup> Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border As Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Pugliese, 'Crisis Heterotopias and Border Zones of the Dead', *Continuum*, 23.5 (2009), 663-79.

<sup>77</sup> See Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (London and New York: Verso, 2016); Nicholas De Genova, 'Migrant Illegality and deportability in Everyday Life', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31 (2002), 419-47.

<sup>78</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), 11-40.

Brexit, to realize that citizenship rights have become increasingly elitist over the last decade, and the right to move and the right to stay of individuals increasingly arbitrary, according to rapidly changing governmental decrees. The multiple, and multiplying, meanings of borders around EU countries fundamentally point towards the necessity to rethink Europe and its values: what do the current death tolls of the Fortress Europe at the borders say about the EU? What principles is Europe defending against the arrival of migrants? Should the discussion be about a “Europe” in brackets, as in the title of the volume edited by Nicholas De Genova,<sup>79</sup> given the blatant contradiction between the founding ideals of the European Union and the widespread violation of human rights at its external, and internal, borders?

Because of its geographical and symbolic role in marking the boundaries of communities, the border will be a constant point of reference throughout the thesis. As a crucial episteme of difference and separation, it resurfaces in all the fields I will investigate, by stressing exclusionary and inclusionary processes, not only in geographical and political terms, but also crucially in representational terms. Whose voices are marginalised, “bordered out”, in today’s cultural sphere? How effective can cultural texts authored by Europeans be in encouraging and enabling the migrants’ self-representation in the public sphere? As I will illustrate, these questions call for a deeper analysis of the body of works produced over the two decades in Europe. Paraphrasing bell hooks,<sup>80</sup> it is not just important what we say, but how we do it,<sup>81</sup> especially when it is a matter of having an impact on society about such a politicized issue as transnational migration today.

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<sup>79</sup> Nicholas De Genova (ed.), *The Borders of "Europe": Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering* (Durham, NC, London: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>80</sup> bell hooks, ‘Marginality as a Site of Resistance’ in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Russell Ferguson and others (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 341-43.

<sup>81</sup> bell hooks, ‘Marginality as a Site of Resistance’, p. 343.



## Migrant Postcoloniality and Beyond

After illustrating the central terms that will inform my analysis, I will now briefly present the theoretical context of my research. Since African migrants do not cease to remain “others” in the European political debate, the theoretical approach at the basis of this thesis will be postcolonial thinking. It is indeed this branch of theory that, since Edward Said’s groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978), has helped illuminate how the Western hegemonic gaze looks onto, and represents, not only the subjected people during the time of formal colonialism, but the “other” today, who is oppressed through exploitation, violence and marginalization in the neocolonial functioning of a globalized world.<sup>82</sup>

Despite its growing relevance to the contemporary border regime of Europe, both in France and Italy postcolonial theory has often remained marginal in the academic and public debate. Achille Mbembe has observed that in the French context a public critical discussion of the nation’s colonial past is substantially absent, as is an effective debate on the neocolonial relationships between France and African countries, often critically referred to as “*Françafrique*”.<sup>83</sup> In the Italian context, postcolonial studies have only started to emerge in the late 1990s and, as Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo have highlighted, while the postcolonial may appear as an outdated perspective in the Anglophone academic departments, in Italy it is ‘alive and thriving’, although frequently marginalized in favour of more established methodologies, especially in the field of Italian studies.<sup>84</sup> In fact,

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<sup>82</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>83</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit*, p. 96. See also Mbembe, *De la postcolonie: Essai sur l’imagination politique dans l’Afrique contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala, 2000).

<sup>84</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, ‘Italy’s Postcolonial ‘Question’: Views from the Southern Frontier of Europe’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 18.4 (2015), 367-83; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, ‘The Italian Postcolonial: A Manifesto’, *Italian Studies*, 69.3 (2014), 425-33. Notable contributions to the development of an Italian perspective on postcolonial studies are Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in A Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Jacqueline Andall

applying postcolonial theory to contemporary migrations can facilitate an understanding of power positions between Europeans and African migrants, putting them in relation to other forms of exploitation, silencing and appropriation.

Migrants as individuals who are systematically discriminated against on racial, class and citizenship grounds at the borders of Europe can indeed be identified as the subaltern *par excellence* of contemporary times, whose marginality is reproduced in the peripheral role they also occupy in the cultural public sphere. Keeping in mind Gayatri Spivak's seminal text *Can the Subaltern Speak?*,<sup>85</sup> the key question formulated in her title seems to echo in the corpus of narratives relating the migrant journeys across the Mediterranean Sea, and today's struggles of displaced and illegalized people. Issues of agency, hegemony and appropriation arise: who is telling these stories, and how? The subaltern position of migrants emerges strikingly in all those narratives re-elaborated by EU voices to advocate in their support, but in which their agency is absent, or only evoked in a tokenistic manner by Western authorship.

In particular, Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism' will be useful to investigate the scarcity of direct migrant voices in the EU cultural industry and to highlight the need for dedicated initiatives aimed at encouraging self-representations of the protagonists of Mediterranean crossings. Differently from mere essentialism, which ignores complexity to focus on an "essential" trait defining individuals and groups, strategic essentialism is conceived as a critical tool for subaltern voices to progressively reclaim agency in a context in which their voices are silenced or underrepresented. This kind of reclaimed

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and Derek Duncan, *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Oxford, New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Rosalind Morris, and Gayatri Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

presence, markedly different from indulging forms of tokenism which abound in the public debate on migration to the EU, would correspond to a timely intervention on the part of migrants themselves in the debate, such as in the case of the Archivio Memorie Migranti project in Rome.<sup>86</sup> However, the fact that these examples remain isolated cases attests to the difficulties faced by similar initiatives in gaining an audience in EU countries, in which Western- authored narratives dominate the cultural market.

While strategic essentialism is conceived to be an intermediate step between marginalization and full agency in the public debate, the presence of migrant voices does not seem to be growing in the contemporary sphere. This is a major reason for which the terminology and methods of postcolonial studies alone, while remaining indispensable to decipher the representation politics of contemporary migration, are insufficient to generate new perspectives on contemporary cultural events. With strategic essentialism in mind, it is certainly necessary to create binary distinctions between migrants and non-migrants, Europeans and non-Europeans, hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives and positioning in a strategic way, to examine the power dynamics implicated in the representations of Mediterranean journeys. At the same time, the risk is to transform them into essentialized categories, without leaving room for the complexity of embodied identities in contemporary mobility.<sup>87</sup> Can EU citizens not adopt alternative power positions different from the stereotyped representations already circulating in the public sphere? Should migrant voices still be primarily identified on the basis of their migratory background? Just as strategic essentialism is conceived to be a phase in the emergence of self-representations, after which the hope

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<sup>86</sup> See <http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>87</sup> See Celeste Ianniciello and Michaela Quadraro, *Memorie transculturali: Estetica contemporanea e critica postcoloniale* (Naples: Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", 2015).

is to affirm more balanced power relations between author, receiving audience and cultural market, at the same time postcolonial theory can only be considered an initial strategy to highlight issues and imagine solutions. The horizon to look upon lies in the 'beyond', as Homi Bhabha has insisted,<sup>88</sup> in the overcoming of the binarism between the West and "the rest", and ultimately, as Chakrabarty has urged, in the 'provincializing' of Europe.<sup>89</sup>

To this regard, the most promising attempts have been advanced by several critics which, in different contexts and with different priorities, are stressing the same need for 'open theory', to use Nicholas Mirzoeff's words.<sup>90</sup> The evocative idea of 'opening theory' encompasses a wide range of theories, all of which call for the adoption of more fluid, non-binary paradigms of thinking with which to interpret personal experiences as they intersect and contribute to build a renewed sense of community in the global era. Prominent examples in the 1990s were the contributions of Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory, which insists on the necessity of surpassing dichotomies and 'blurring boundaries without burning bridges' between established categories,<sup>91</sup> and Butler's reflections on gender performativity, which can be extended to other aspects of identity, including citizenship status, class and race. The crucial contribution of gender studies to the case of representing migration is indeed the stress on the need to challenge binary thinking and explore the borders erected not only as geographical but also as conceptual and ethical boundaries between individuals.

The surpassing of rationalized, traditionally-conceived ideas of unity and identity is also welcomed in the theorization of Édouard

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<sup>88</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>89</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say*, ed. by Anna Bernard, Ziad Elmarsafy and Stuart Murray (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>90</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Empty the Museum, Decolonize the Curriculum, Open Theory', *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 53 (2017), 6–22.

<sup>91</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 4.

Glissant's 'poétique de la relation' and 'le Tout-Monde', which stresses the necessity to embrace multiple identities and rethink how they can coexist and relate to one another in a shared world.<sup>92</sup> In France, such need has also reflected on the debate surrounding the terms 'francophone', 'postcolonial' and 'immigrant' used to refer to writers and artists expressing themselves in the French language. This culminated in the manifesto 'Pour une "littérature-monde" en français' first published in *Le Monde* in 2007 and signed by 44 writers, among which Édouard Glissant, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Maryse Condé and Fabienne Kanor who called for a more inclusive approach to the literature produced in French, regardless of the nationality of its author, thus challenging the traditional correspondence between geographical boundaries and their official language, aiming to reach a more transnational dimension.<sup>93</sup>

In a similar move, Iain Chambers's notion of 'Mediterranean thinking', like Glissant with the Caribbean, takes the Mediterranean basin as a source of inspiration for more fluid concepts of identity and community.<sup>94</sup> Drawing on the ambiguity of the Mediterranean Sea as a symbolic basin of cultural clashes, domination, but also dialogue and cooperation throughout centuries, this perspective calls for new networks of cosmopolitan solidarity between the global North and the

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<sup>92</sup> See in particular Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) and *Traité du Tout-Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

<sup>93</sup> See *Le Monde*, 'Pour une "littérature-monde" en français', *Le Monde*, 15 March 2007, [https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/15/des-ecrivains-plaident-pour-un-roman-en-francais-ouvert-sur-le-monde\\_883572\\_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/15/des-ecrivains-plaident-pour-un-roman-en-francais-ouvert-sur-le-monde_883572_3260.html) [accessed 10 September 2018] and the publication: Michel Le Bris, Jean Rouaud and Eva Almassy (eds.), *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007). Regarding the debate on the Francophonie and the French postcolonial, see Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (eds.), *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010); Charles Forsdick, 'Between 'French' and 'Francophone': French Studies and the Postcolonial Turn', *French Studies*, 59.4 (2005), 523-30 and Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (eds.), *Postcolonial Thought in the French-Speaking World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).

<sup>94</sup> Iain Chambers, 'The Mediterranean: A Postcolonial Sea', *Third Text*, 18.5 (2004), 423-433.

global South, which are the more urgent today with the exacerbation of a Europe of borders.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, transnationality is at the basis of the numerous movements of solidarity with migrants across the world, which contest restrictive definitions of citizenship and belonging, and campaign to defend the right to move across borders and, more widely, for an inclusive, active relationality between members of diverse communities.<sup>96</sup>

Although the term ‘migrancy’ and the adjective ‘migrant’ are often used to refer to theories which challenge traditional notions of identity and belonging, such as in the works of Mieke Bal and Iain Chambers,<sup>97</sup> researchers must also remain wary of the difference between these acceptations of theoretical ‘migration’ and the embodied, embedded condition experienced by displaced people across the globe. Indeed, despite the common goals of expanding the horizon of the ‘we’ and the contesting politics of divisiveness, the hardships of migrants today should not be taken as the starting points for Europeans to transcend, but deserve attention in their own right as embodied stories of subalternity and global injustice. For this reason, I will refer in this thesis to migration not as a theoretical horizon of nomadic, plural thinking, but as the concrete experience of individuals stuck at the borders of Europe, marginalised by immigration policies, and discriminated against on the basis of citizenship and race.

In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit Referendum in 2016, British Prime Minister Theresa May stated that ‘if you believe you are a citizen

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<sup>95</sup> See also Paola Zaccaria’s interdisciplinary project ‘Un/Walling the Mediterranean: S/Murare il Mediterraneo’ at the University of Bari <https://smuraremediterraneo.wordpress.com/chi-siamo/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>96</sup> Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin and Bolette Blaagaard (eds.), *After Cosmopolitanism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>97</sup> Mieke Bal, ‘In your face: Migratory Aesthetics’, in *The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and History*, ed. by Sten Pultz Moslund, Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 147-169. See also Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993).

of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere'.<sup>98</sup> Such a regressive, populist rhetoric, which retrieves deeply conservative notions of identity as patriotism and exclusive “loyalty” to one nation state, was powerfully opposed by philosopher Kwame Appiah in his Reith Lecture in October 2016, in which he affirmed:

Real cosmopolitanism is not a privilege; it is an obligation. It does not belong to the rarefied circles of some frequent-flyer upper class. It belongs to anyone who cares about global justice, about the environment, about the alleviation of strife and carnage beyond our immediate national borders.<sup>99</sup>

Appiah's position echoes the countless movements and initiatives of solidarity created over the last decades to contrast restrictive measures adopted by both Western and non-Western countries with regards to citizenship and the freedom of movement. These movements urge for an opening towards those who are reduced to “others” in globalized societies, testing new forms of support and inclusion for individuals inhabiting subaltern positions in the public sphere due to issues of gender, race, social status, nationality. The central aim of this thesis is precisely to understand the ways in which the representations authored by Europeans can contribute to oppose, but also comply with, the “othering” process to which migrants, especially illegal ones, are continually subjected.

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<sup>98</sup> John Crace, 'Theresa May treads the Brexit path of empathy and righteousness', *Guardian*, 5 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/05/theresa-may-treads-the-brexit-path-of-empathy-and-righteousness> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>99</sup> See BBC, 'Mrs May, we are all citizens of the world, says philosopher', *BBC News*, 20 October 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-37788717> [accessed 10 September 2018].





**Part I**  
**Borrowed Gazes:**  
**Recreating the Migrant's Point of View**



## 1. Border Burners: Mediterranean Migrations in French and Italian Literary Fiction of the 2000s

‘La frontiera è un termometro del mondo’.  
(Alessandro Leogrande, *La frontiera*, 2015,  
p. 16).

‘The object of our attention should  
be everything that the border is the  
place of’. (Michel Agier,  
*Borderlands*, 2016, p. 100).

Literature has been among the first fields of cultural production to respond to the social changes triggered by new migrations to Europe at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This chapter explores the ways in which contemporary Italian and French literature has followed these changing patterns of Mediterranean mobility, and the representations of both the migrants and their journeys produced over the last fifteen years. Since the end of the 1990s, the rise of migration journeys across the Mediterranean Sea has been paired with increasingly difficult conditions in which these journeys are undertaken: illegal status, human trafficking, lack of coordination of host countries in providing rescue operations and reception facilities. The following pages will consider the fictional rendition of these undocumented migrations from sub-Saharan Africa to Italy and France, as they have been imagined and conceptualised from a European perspective. The first case study I analyse is Laurent Gaudé’s novel *Eldorado* (2006); the second one is Fabienne Kanor’s novel *Faire l’aventure* (2014), and the third one is the long poem *Solo andata* (2005) by Erri De Luca.<sup>1</sup>

Kanor, Gaudé and De Luca are all affirmed writers with a wide readership, both in France and Italy, and internationally. Their success is attested by the numerous prizes won by each of them: among other

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<sup>1</sup>Laurent Gaudé, *Eldorado* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2006); Fabienne Kanor, *Faire l’aventure* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2014); Erri De Luca, *Solo andata: Righe che vanno troppo spesso a capo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005).

awards, in 2004, Kanor won the Fetkann! Prize for her novel *D'eaux douces*, a novel set between the Antilles and France, and in 2014, she received the Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe et de Tout-Monde for *Faire l'aventure*. Gaudé was awarded the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens in 2003 for his novel *La mort du roi Tsongor* and the Prix Goncourt for *Le soleil des Scorta* in 2004. Finally, De Luca has been prolific as a novelist, poet and writer of non-fiction, and received the Jean Monnet Prix Européen de Littérature for his literary career in 2013. Therefore, the element shared by these literary works discussed in this chapter is the way in which their established European authors utilize the literary space to tell the migrant's story. Indeed, in their markedly different styles, they wish to bring the experience of the illegal migrant closer to the European reading public, offering an insight in his or her experience and psychology.

These three texts directly engage with the stereotypical portrayal of the migrant as a powerless victim by attempting to make the protagonists of the Mediterranean journeys in control of their own narration, be it only in the fictional dimension. In fact, whether in third or first person, the perspective and the voice of the migrant protagonist in these texts are re-imagined in a deeply symbolical and poetical attempt to return him or her the dignity which the clandestine condition has deprived them of. Such literary operation aims both at “borrowing” the voice of the migrant to represent the journey from an internal viewpoint, and at “lending” the literary space inhabited by these established European authors to hosting the protagonists of the border crossings. Indeed, they represent an invitation to inhabit, via the literary medium, the migrant condition and to *literally* put oneself into his or her shoes. Since migration stories in the news and in the political sphere are still predominantly narrated from European perspectives, this strategy certainly results in a powerful effect of estrangement for the Italian or French public, which are invited to reflect on migratory events under a new light.

*Eldorado*, *Faire l'aventure* and *Solo andata* can therefore be seen as acts of reflection on, and engagement with the contemporary debate on global justice and freedom of movement: focusing on the undocumented migrant as the protagonist is a way for their authors to gain an imaginary insight into the illegalized condition and its consequences on the life of African migrants from an intimate perspective, far away from the tones of threat and emergency typical of mass media debates on irregular migrants. Yet, the same external perspective on these migratory stories that such texts aim at opposing inevitably re-emerges in the vantage position of the European authors as they express their dissent towards conservative immigration policies. Much as it tries to adopt that of the African migrant, the point of view offered remains intrinsically European, since it derives from an Italian or French authorial stance, with the risk of “cornering” the migrant protagonist to a fixed, predictable characterization. In fact, while showing the importance of literature as a realm of commitment to investigate migration events, the following pages will also reflect on the problematic nature of relating the story of the “other”.

This tension between commitment and advocacy needs to be problematised in the analysis of similar fictional accounts: how is the creative urge to take sides with migrants and asylum seekers translated in these texts? What are the drawbacks in the rendition of similar “borrowed” stories? How does the European perspective interfere with the migrant’s recreated point of view, and how is the experience of the journey processed and re-elaborated? Two appear to be the major concerns of interest for a critical analysis: on the one hand, what is narrated by the author; on the other, who is the fictional narrator of the story, and the effects implied by this specific perspective on the literary text. Indeed, these two factors are inextricably connected to the point of locating this kind of works on the verge between literary commitment and literary appropriation, raising questions about their

ethical stance, an aspect which remains largely unexplored in previous literature to this day.

### 1.1 Authoring Migration Literature: Whose Voice?

Although recent Italian and French literature about migration have each experienced a different evolution in the course of the last thirty years, a common prominent aspect has been the difficulty to name such literary production.<sup>2</sup> Not only for France and Italy, but for most national literatures the question has arisen of how to classify and define texts that are issued from migratory experiences. In fact, both the critics Charles Bonn and Søren Frank have questioned the choice between the definition 'migration literature' (*littérature de la migration*) and 'migrant literature' (*littérature migrante*): while in the first case the stress is on the topic of migration as a defining element, in the second the determining factor is the migrant background of the person authoring the text.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a crucial question immediately arises: who is writing these texts on migratory experiences?

In the case of France, *beur* literature has designated since the early 1980s those novels written by Maghrebi second-generation authors about hybrid identities in postcolonial France, therefore giving priority to the authorial voice as a marking feature. Notable examples in this sense were Mehdi Charef's *Le Thé au Harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1983) and Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1985).<sup>4</sup> As far as Italy is

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<sup>2</sup>Mirjam Gebauer and Pia Schwarz-Lausten (eds.), *Migration and Literature in Contemporary Europe* (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>This debate is summarised in Elien Declercq, 'Écriture migrante, Littérature (Im)migrante, Migration Literature: Réflexions sur un concept aux contours imprécis', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 339.3 (2011), 301-310.

<sup>4</sup>Besides the label *beur*, which is now considered outdated both in literature and cinema, a body of texts written by north African authors in French on the theme of Mediterranean migration has rapidly grown, as testified by Bonn's comprehensive study: Charles Bonn (ed.), *Littératures des Immigrations* (Paris: Universités Paris-Nord et Casablanca 2 and Éditions L'Harmattan, 1995).

concerned, when *Immigrato* by Salah Methnani and Mario Fortunato, and Pap Khouma and Oreste Pivetta's *Io venditore di elefanti* were published in 1990s as first accounts of contemporary immigration to Italy in literature, they were hailed by critic Armando Gnisci as the birth of a veritable new literary genre, which in his predictions would have moved from a biographical to a thematic paradigm.<sup>5</sup> Since then, dozens of works, mainly novels, have contributed to the growth of Italian literature about migration. However, this has mainly occurred in the format of testimony - for example, with the recent *Nel mare ci sono i coccodrilli* written by Fabio Geda and Enaiyatollah Akbari (2010) - from which it has struggled to detach itself.<sup>6</sup> With few notable exceptions such as the works by Algerian Italy-based writer Amara Lakhous or by the Italian writer of Somali descent Igiaba Scego,<sup>7</sup> Italian migration literature has in fact experienced a setback in its development, since it still appears dominated by co-authored texts (one Italian and one non-Italian writer) or by autobiographical accounts of migration journeys, which revolve around the documentary "authenticity" (the idea of *storia vera*, true story) of the events described. Vice versa, a conspicuous number of novels by migrant authors have been published in the last decade, as recently analysed by Jennifer Burns, but these more often revolve on the settling in Italy from the point of view of an immigrant, often women,<sup>8</sup> and seldom represent the undocumented journey from

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<sup>5</sup> See Armando Gnisci, *La Letteratura Italiana della Migrazione* (Rome: Lilit, 1998); *Creoli Meticci Migranti Clandestini Ribelli* (Rome: Meltemi, 1998); *Creolizzare l'Europa: Letteratura e Migrazione*, (Rome: Meltemi, 2003). See also Daniele Comberiati, *Scrivere nella lingua dell'altro: La letteratura degli immigrati in Italia (1987-2007)* (Brussels, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop, 'Selling and Storytelling: African Autobiographies in Italy' in Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds.), *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 217- 38.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Amara Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (Rome: e/o, 2006); Igiaba Scego, *Oltre Babilonia* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008) and *La mia casa è dove sono* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> See Alessandra Di Maio, *Wor(l)ds in Progress: A Study of Contemporary Migrant Writings* (Milan: Mimesis, 2008) and 'Black Italia: Contemporary Migrant Writers from Africa', in *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, ed. by Darlene C. Hine, Trica Keaton, and Stephen Small (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009). See also the

Africa to Europe, which was not experienced by their authors.<sup>9</sup> The same can in fact be observed in the French context, which however has experienced a different evolution because of the established use of French language on the part of African and Caribbean authors relating about migratory experiences.<sup>10</sup>

In reality, in both countries the lack of “direct” voices representing the Mediterranean crossings of the 2000s in the literary form must be acknowledged, since the majority of fictional representations in Italian and French editorial context still derives from a European perspective.<sup>11</sup> The reasons are not only to be retraced in the difficulty of migrant authors, or aspiring authors, to succeed in publishing their works or attracting the interest of editors and audience. More significant to this regard, I believe, are the recentness of the migratory events at issue, which require time to be processed through literature, but especially the often traumatic nature of these same experiences, which are difficult, and above all painful, to be transposed in the literary form. Ultimately, what is to be thought, or done, about the absence of these voices in the literary landscape?

The answer suggested by the three case studies examined in this chapter is that the urgency of providing a representation of current

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Festival Letterature Migranti in Palermo <http://www.festivaletteraturemigranti.it> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>9</sup> See Jennifer Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013); *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) and Simona Wright, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak? The Politics of Identity and Difference in Italian Postcolonial Women’s Writing’, *Italian Culture*, 12 (2004), 92-113. All these studies signal the emergence of a corpus of women writing in Italian from a migratory background, focusing on issues of racial and cultural identity and hybrid belonging.

<sup>10</sup> See Bonn, *Littératures des Immigrations*.

<sup>11</sup> Recent notable examples in the French context are Delphine Coulin, *Samba pour la France* (Paris: Seuil, 2011) and Béatrice Vallaeys (ed.), *Ce qu’ils font est juste: ils mettent la solidarité et l’hospitalité à l’honneur* (Paris: Don Quichotte, 2017). For the Italian context, a more recent editorial case has been Giuseppe Catozzella’s *Non dirmi che hai paura* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2014), relating the true story of young athlete Samia Yusuf Omar, who died during the Mediterranean crossing, and whose story has been collected by the Italian journalist with the assistance of Samia’s sister.



migratory events prevails over the “authenticity” of these same authorial voices. Indeed, migration literature constitutes a prominent area of literary commitment in today’s cultural sphere.<sup>12</sup> Both creative prose and poetry traditionally remain creative realms in which complexities can be conceptualised, assimilated and questioned, inviting the reader to adopt new perspectives on reality. As John Su has argued, literary fiction still constitutes a unique space for the public to re-elaborate the conceptions of “self” and “other” in today’s globalised dimension.<sup>13</sup> The fact of casting a closer look at Mediterranean mobility to temporarily inhabit the individual point of view of the migrant can therefore transform the way the audience look at this journey, inspiring empathy and solidarity with its protagonists. While providing a stage for the voice of the other, these texts also constitute a chance for the authors to voice their own dissent by denouncing inhumane conditions experienced by undocumented migrants at the EU borders. In this sense, they veritably embody that ‘*souci de contemporanéité*’ (concern for contemporaneity) that, as Benoît Denis argued, remains the crucial interest of any writer concerned by intervening in the political debates of his or her time.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, the choice of focusing on European literature in this chapter is not a decision to endorse or prioritize Italian or French representations rather than the ones authored by migrants themselves, but a way to explore some of the strategies put in place by European authors to transform creative writing into a “sounding board” for migrants’ rights. The element of social commitment which can be detected in these literary texts is in fact aimed at establishing, through literature, a continuum with historical events and a dialogue not only between reality and fiction, but also between migrant communities and

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<sup>12</sup>See Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries*, p. 1-19.

<sup>13</sup> See John Su, *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup>Benoît Denis, *Littérature et Engagement: De Pascal à Sartre* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 38.

host societies.<sup>15</sup> In this reclaimed space of conversation, established representations can be challenged and perspectives reversed, creating a narrative time in which the readers can reconsider Europe's handling of the current "migration crisis".

As Frank has highlighted, in a globalised world literary analysis should move beyond the authors' nationality and ethnicity, and be approached from a transnational, thematic perspective, especially when it deals with international migration and displacement, which necessarily require the adoption of a wider paradigm.<sup>16</sup> However, the fact that literary representations of migration are still entrusted in an external, non-migrant point of view only illustrates more powerfully that sub-Saharan migrants struggle to find a voice and an audience not only in the EU political sphere, but also in its cultural realm. For this reason, there are still cases in which it is necessary to focus on, and question, the authorial stance, were it not only in terms of Spivak's strategic essentialism.<sup>17</sup> When it is a matter of literature as engaged communication to the reading public, should it not be migrants themselves to speak, especially when they are often absent in the political debate? Precisely when it comes to migration literature, the absence of direct voices is not an incidental phenomenon but merely seems to reproduce the unequal power balance between non-EU

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<sup>15</sup> See Catherine Mazauric, *Mobilités d'Afrique en Europe: Récits et Figures de l'Aventure* (Paris: Karthala, 2012), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Søren Frank, *Migration and Literature: Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). As Igiaba Scego has underlined, there is a clear risk of pigeonholing migrant writers according to their biographical experiences, to the point that both publishers and readership expect them to mainly write about their personal experiences and views about identity, without the possibility to move on to other themes. In this sense, the label "migrant writer" becomes an actual 'cage' for writers of migrant background. See Igiaba Scego, 'Relazione di Igiaba Scego', <http://www.eksetra.net/studi-interculturali/relazione-interculturali-edizione-2004/relazione-di-igiaba-scego> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>17</sup> Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism is particularly relevant in the context of literary fiction. Privileging the voice of migrant authors should indeed be a priority in the public sphere, but this seldom appears the case, and the most "direct" voices have been obtained in co-authored texts, especially in the Italian context, but with related problem of how these voices were filtered and adapted by the Italian co-author. See Cristina Lombardi-Diop, 'Selling and Storytelling: African Autobiographies in Italy', p. 224.

migrants and European citizens. The fact that the major voices in the literary sphere are still entrusted to European authors further underlines the marginality inhabited by migrant communities, especially the ones experiencing the illegal condition, in the public space. Indeed, advocating for the “other” is always an ambiguous initiative, which never results neutral, especially when the “other” is present and not consulted, as bell hooks reminds us.<sup>18</sup>

It is by bearing in mind these controversial ethical questions that *Eldorado*, *Faire l'aventure* and *Solo andata* will be analysed in the following pages. While these texts are certainly emblematic for their literary engagement in support of migrants' rights, and for the echo they have found in European reading public, they are also of extreme interest for the way in which they re-elaborate and epitomize contemporary migration crossings from a European perspective. In fact, they still essentially contribute to develop a literary reflection on Mediterranean migration stories, which needs to be carefully examined, were it only for the way in which it further exposes the European provenience of these texts.

It is possible to identify three elements that recur in these narratives, just as they were already central in the political debate: the characterization of the migrant, the border, the reflection on Europe and its controversial immigration policies. The way in which these elements feature in the case studies is significant not only because it reveals how they are used to advocate for migrants' rights, but also how they are shaped by a European imaginary which is clearly not always immune from mass media stereotypes.

Firstly, the priority concern for much of the contemporary narratives about Mediterranean journeys is undoubtedly that of re-writing the character of the illegal migrant. In contrast with a

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<sup>18</sup>bell hooks, 'Marginality as a Site of Resistance' in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Russell Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 341-43.

widespread rhetoric that criminalises unauthorised Mediterranean crossings, the authors of three case studies attempt to justify these journeys. As I will show, the migrant protagonists in *Eldorado* and *Faire l'aventure* are closely connected respectively to the portrayal of the *harrag* and the *aventurier*, two characterizations of the illegal migrant issued from north and central African popular culture which embody a spirit of defiance towards Europe's immigration policies and the desire to re-claim the right to travel across borders.<sup>19</sup> These representations also bear much resemblance to that sub-category of migration literature which Hakim Abderrezak called 'illiterature', referring to the Maghrebi literary accounts of illegal sea passages from north Africa to Spain and France, a type of narrative that mixes documentary and mythical elements and which is rapidly expanding not only in the literary form but also in music and cinema.<sup>20</sup> However, such a dissident characterization of migrant subjects also qualifies them as heroic figures of the Mediterranean journey, approaching them both to the

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<sup>19</sup>Evoking the image of fire, the term *harraga* comes from Maghrebi Arabic *harrag* (s.)/*harraga* (pl.) and means 'those who burn', from the verb *harraga* 'to burn'). It indicates the young migrant (mainly male) from the Maghreb or from Sub-Saharan Africa who attempts to cross ('to burn') the Mediterranean Sea from North African coasts to find better life opportunities - employment and education - in Europe. Established in spoken language across the Maghreb and permeated into the media, the *harga* ("the burning") is often discussed as a major plague affecting north African youths, causing hundreds of deaths each year. Vice versa, the term *aventurier* in West and Central Africa describes the young and inexperienced individual leaving his or her familiar context to travel and seek employment opportunities, to then usually come back and settle. Relating it to the previously existing figures of the *sapeur* and the diamond trafficker, socio-anthropologist Sylvie Bredeloup describes the migratory experience of the *aventure* as similar to a moral experience, in which young men- and increasingly young women- get in contact with a different lifestyle, typically the Western context, and expand their knowledge of the world. The experience of the *aventure*, with its dangers and unpredictability, shapes the young individual, who receives social prestige or humiliation from the community depending on the outcome of the journey. See Sylvie Bredeloup, 'The Figure of the Adventurer as an African Migrant', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 25.2 (2013), 170-82; Sylvie Bredeloup, *Migrations d'aventures: Terrains africains* (Paris: Éditions du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, 2014).

<sup>20</sup>Hakim Abderrezak, *Ex-centric Migrations: Europe and the Maghreb in Mediterranean Cinema, Literature, and Music* (Bloomington, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016). A similar approach is adopted by Catherine Mazauric in her *Mobilités d'Afrique*, which considers a wider corpus of texts written in French, both by European and North African authors.

African *topos* of the “border burner”, with its powerful connotation of rite of passage, and to European literary tradition, raising numerous questions about the consequences of this type of creative portrayal.

The second element to inevitably feature in these narratives is the border, both as a physical and a symbolic presence. Transformed into an evocative image of hostility towards indigent foreigners, the border as a tangible and omnipresent wall, a reinforced fence or an invisible barrier is also a reminder of both the dynamics of selective inclusion of migrants in the economic circuit and of their labour exploitation on the part of European governments, made easier precisely by their irregular status. As Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have argued, with the tightening of immigration policies borders have become not only mere practical boundaries to prevent undesirable arrivals to the European Union, but also strategic filters for illegal migrants whose access is prevented or tolerated according to the needs of the European market.<sup>21</sup> The political and economic implications of borders are largely reflected in the literary revisiting undertaken in *Eldorado*, *Faire l’aventure* and *Solo andata*. In particular, the crucial border areas explored by these texts are the Spanish enclaves in Morocco, which are crossed by *Eldorado*’s protagonist, and the more fluid and undefined border zone of the Mediterranean Sea, especially in the portion comprised between Libya, Tunisia, Malta and the Sicilian islands.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, as a number of studies have recently observed, the border in migration literature often transcends its physical dimension to acquire the symbolic value of ‘détroit’, of dangerous passage whose overcoming can lead to improve one’s life conditions, but also to struggles, suffering and even death.<sup>23</sup> Finally, European boundaries are

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<sup>21</sup> Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border As Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> See Dominic Thomas, ‘The Global Mediterranean: Literature and Migration’, *Yale French Studies*, 120 (2011), 140-153.

<sup>23</sup> Ana-Paula Coutinho, Maria de Fatima Outeirinho and José Domingues Almeida (eds.), *Passages et naufrages migrants: Les fictions du détroit* (Paris: L’Harmattan 2012).

represented in these fictions as geographical markers of global inequality, inviting the reader's attention to focus on those processes of privilege and exclusion which Ayelet Shachar coined as 'birthright lottery', namely the influence of the individual's casual place of birth onto his or her access to rights and opportunities.<sup>24</sup> This will be particularly the case in the reflections of Biram, the protagonist of *Faire l'aventure*.

A third recurring element in these stories is the severe criticism towards the migration policies of European governments, and towards the indifference of part of the EU citizens for the hardship endured by migrants. Indeed, in these three works, as in much of contemporary migration literature, approaching the story of the sub-Saharan migrant cannot abide from examining the moral position of the members of the host society. What does the current state of migrants' rights say about the values of European society? It will be highlighted how, to different extents, the three case studies engage with the portrayal of Italian or French characters, either as co-protagonists or as secondary figures, representing the difficulty of institutions and individuals alike to think and act according to a cosmopolitan principle of solidarity which would guarantee access to resources for a higher number of people. Cosmopolitanism as the philosophical horizon of living together in a shared and interconnected world appears in these texts as a utopian project in times of closure towards the migrant as "other", seen as a social and economic threat and thus excluded and rejected by reinforcing Europe's external borders.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ayelet Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery: Citizenship and Global Inequality* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Cosmopolitanism as the social and ethical consciousness of living in a shared world bearing in mind each person's interrelation with other subjects appears at the antipodes of the idea of "Fortress Europe". The ideal of a harmonious co-existence of alterities seems negated by the EU's tendency to border off migrants, who embody the foreigner *par excellence* in today's society. Indeed, the challenge of contemporary philosophy lies, according to Braidotti, Appiah and Agier, in the attempt to reconcile the tendencies towards xenophobia and Eurocentrism with the urgency to adopt mobility and plurality as a common framework for a share future. See Rosi Braidotti,

The following analysis investigates how the literary treatment of the migrant character, the border and the European space endeavours to produce alternative representations, and connotations, of contemporary Mediterranean crossings, sometimes succeeding in countering inflated media representations, but sometimes also risking reinforcing them.

### **1.2 Harraga Crossings: the Migrant as Resolute Hero in *Eldorado***

Over the last decade, Laurent Gaudé has voiced on several occasions his commitment to promote migrants' rights. Besides the publication of *Eldorado*, he has frequently participated in projects in support of displaced communities, for example by writing the script for Yolande Moreau's documentary *Nulle part en France* (2016), or by publishing the collection of poems *De sang et de lumière* (2017) as a call for solidarity towards marginalised people in contemporary societies.<sup>26</sup> However, it is in his novel *Eldorado* that the writer sketches one of the most vivid characterizations of the illegal migrant in recent French literature. This novel is in fact marked by an impressionistic and yet epic style, which powerfully brings to life the points of view of the protagonists in an intricate development of events.

The story relates two parallel itineraries: on the one side, the experience of Salvatore, a Sicilian coastal guard who, after yet another rescue operation of migrant boats at sea after which he is obliged to consign the illegal migrants to the authorities, decides to give up his job and seek redemption by commencing a reverse migratory journey

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Patrick Hanafin and Bolette Blaagaard (eds.), *After Cosmopolitanism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Penguin, 2007); Agier, *Borderlands*.

<sup>26</sup>Gaudé's reflections on his visits to the migrant camps of Calais and Grande Synthe were published with the title 'Ci-gît la France', a verse taken from his poem 'Notre-Dame-des-Jungles' contained in the collection *De sang et de lumière* (Paris: Thélème, 2017), <https://leihebdo.fr/journal/numero/93/ci-gt-la-france-1453.html> [accessed 10 September 2018].

towards Africa. On the other side, the story of Soleiman, a young Sudanese migrant who illegally crosses the desert to reach Ceuta, from which he plans to trespass the fenced border and enter the EU via Spain. The wanderings of the two characters will accidentally cross in Algeria, and then continue towards opposite directions. Salvatore will be run over by a lorry and find death soon after their meeting, while Soleiman's destiny is left suspended immediately after he succeeds in entering Europe.<sup>27</sup>

One of the first deeply original element in this novel is the author's attempt to bring together the point of view of an Italian and a Sudanese character over alternating chapters, thus inviting the reader to move from one perspective to the other throughout the story. This is a clear sign of Gaudé's intention to challenge the mainstream narrative of migratory journeys, which typically adopt an exclusively European perspective and ignores the direct voices of migrants. By welcoming Soleiman's point of view into his fictional work, the writer tries to imagine the thoughts and emotions experienced by a young migrant facing such a dangerous journey, and conveys them through a first-person narration, differently from the third person adopted for Salvatore's story. Indeed, rather than creating a plausible story, Gaudé's interest in this novel was to emphasize the psychology of his characters to emotionally involve the readers and make them reflect on the complex nature of contemporary migrations. This priority can also be detected in his decision to avoid any preparatory fieldwork in the Mediterranean, and to focus on the impressions generated merely by reports and documentaries.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For a detailed plot, see Appendix 1.

<sup>28</sup> In an interview, Gaudé stated: 'J'ai travaillé en lisant des articles, en regardant des photos, avec un travail d'imagination sur les détails. J'ai décidé de ne pas aller sur place, bien que ce ne soit pas très compliqué d'aller à Lampedusa. Mais si j'y étais allé, j'aurais eu envie d'écrire sur ce que j'avais vu, faire du reportage. Je pensais que le livre serait réussi si j'affirmais la fiction plus que la réalité. Je voulais trouver une histoire, des trajectoires auxquelles l'on puisse croire, et pas seulement des faits réels', Isabelle Falconnier, 'Entretien avec Laurent Gaudé. Eldorado ou la chimère qui nous fait croire', 25 September 2006, <https://www.payot.ch/fr/selections/payot-l-hebdo->



However, an even more original feature in the novel is the close connection between the fictional description of Soleiman's journey to Europe and the experience of the 'border burner' issued from north-African popular culture. Even if the term *harrag* never directly occurs in the novel, a strength of Gaudé's text is that it brings the experience of the 'border burner' closer to the European public in all its youthful resoluteness: just like the *harrag*, the protagonist ventures illegally towards Europe, determined to start a new life on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea; he is obsessed by the idea of starting over elsewhere, and to leave behind the corruption and lack of opportunities experienced in the country of origin. Through the symbolic intention of "burning" the border, Soleiman expresses not only his non-acceptance of the political *status quo* in his homeland, but also a rebellion towards a world order perceived as unequal in its distribution of economic and social resources.<sup>29</sup>

What the character of Soleiman most importantly shares with the figure of the *harrag* is, however, its heroic connotation. In fact, the north African figure has mainly emerged in the independent press as a way of presenting emigrating youth not as victims or as criminals, but

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/septembre-2006-les-meilleurs-romans-de-la-rentre-e-entretien-laurent-gaud%C3%A9-eldorado-ou-la-chim%C3%A8re-qui-nous-fait-croire [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>29</sup> See Zakya Daoud, *Gibraltar Improbable Frontière: De Colomb aux Clandestins* (Paris: Éditions Séguir et Anglet, 2002) and Virginie Lydie, *Traversée Interdite! Les Harragas Face à l'Europe Forteresse* (Le Pré Saint-Gervais: Le Passager Clandestin, 2011). For the representation of the *harga* in Francophone literature, see Mazauric, *Mobilités d'Afrique*. A number of anthropologists have associated the illegal 'border burning' with juvenile rites of passage, in which the crossing constitutes a symbolic death followed by a re-birth in adulthood. The *harga* also reflect, according to Stefania Pandolfo's fascinating interpretation, many culturally restricted images present in the migrants' imaginary, such as the *sirat*, the hair-narrow passage separating the mortal world from Paradise and Hell in the Quran, or theological concepts such as *al-quant* ('despair') which refers both to the 'temptation of doing away with life, the loss of all hope, in the religious sense, but also, in colloquial Arabic, to "a feeling of oppression, rage, absence of horizon"', Stefania Pandolfo, "The Burning': Finitude and the Politico-Theological Imagination of Illegal Migration', *Anthropological Theory*, 7 (2007), 329-63 (p. 335). For the Moroccan context, see Arab Chadia, 'Le hrague ou comment les Marocains brûlent les frontières', *Hommes et Migrations*, 1266 (2007), 82-94. The figure of the *harrag* has also been immortalized in Merzak Allouache's film *Harragas* and in Boualem Samsal's novel *Harraga* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

as exasperated individuals whose illegal journey is legitimised by the unjust living conditions experienced in their social context. Such Maghrebi self-representations, which qualify border crossings as veritable acts of bravery and rebellion, constitute essential traits also of Soleiman's depiction, beginning with his crossing of the Sahara Desert.

Un homme tabassé et un boiteux marchent vers  
l'Algérie, le Maroc et l'Espagne. Sans rien sur le  
dos. Nous sommes deux silhouettes improbables  
et nous partons à l'assaut du monde infini. Sans  
eau. Sans carte. Cela fera rire les oiseaux qui nous  
survoleront.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, entering the migrant's point of view the reader is invited to understand his desire to leave his past of deprivation, to imagine the struggles of undertaking the journey illegally, using alternative routes planned for by smugglers, and to experience the physical and emotional challenges of illegal migration: hunger and thirst, uncomfortable and dangerous means of transportation, the constant fear of being arrested and deported, uncertainty for the future. Of course, the migratory journey also reveals itself to the young Sudanese in all its dehumanising aspects which will transform him into a 'silhouette improbable', but also into a 'bête charognarde'<sup>31</sup> – for example, Soleiman is surprised to see how easily he accepts to assault and rob a passer-by in order to pay the next leg of his journey. In this sense, the point of view of Soleiman never idealises the illegal journey but regards it as a necessary passage to reclaim a different status on the other side of the border.

Such a heroic characterization of the migrant, who endures all sorts of violence and humiliations, is certainly facilitated in the novel by the way Soleiman's point of view is represented. As already mentioned, *Eldorado* alternates the point of view of Salvatore with that of Soleiman, in order to develop both focalizations in parallel, inviting the reader to identify with both characters. However, the two perspectives are

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<sup>30</sup> *Eldorado*, p. 123.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

rendered differently: while Soleiman's point of view is conveyed in the present tense and in the first person, Salvatore's is developed in the third person and past tense. Moreover, even if the point of view of Salvatore opens and ends the novel, suggesting that it might constitute the prevailing point of view from which to look at the story, the immediacy and "closeness" with which the point of view of the Sudanese protagonist is evoked does steal the scene to the Italian character and has a much more dramatic effect on the reader. Such a direct rendition of the migrant's perspective is indeed a unique feature of Gaudé's novel, further amplified by an epic style that insists on the heroic nature of his journey. Such are, for example, the character's reflections after the border crossing: 'Et les émigrants continueront à se presser aux portes de l'Europe, toujours plus pauvres, toujours plus affamés. Les matraques seront toujours plus dures mais la course des damnés toujours plus rapide'.<sup>32</sup> In such a solemn tone, not only Soleiman emerges as the true protagonist of the story, but the predicament of the figure of the *harrag* is powerfully brought to life in the European literary context.

Although *Eldorado* is probably the first example of such a bold, heroicizing close-up on the illegal migrant in recent French literature, a similar depiction appears to be part of a wider positivizing approach to migration stories which has emerged in critical thinking and independent media over the last decades.<sup>33</sup> Such a re-appraisal of the migrant's figure, indeed radical if compared with mainstream representations, appears to signal a veritable new way to look at the migratory phenomenon, marked first and foremost by a reversal of the European, and more generally Western gaze by adopting the migrant's

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>33</sup> Prominent reflections on alternative and more positive depictions of illegal migration are provided in the works of Michel Agier, Sylvie Bredeloup, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, but also in Walter Mignolo's theorization of border thinking: Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ, Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

perspective. As Michel Agier observed, migrants stuck at the borders of Europe truly embody a new cosmopolitan subjectivity in today's society, since their presence 'symbolizes alterity and mobility with an insistence, even obstinacy, vis-à-vis a world that sees them as a problem, and thereby also sees itself likewise'.<sup>34</sup> The "border burning" of the illegal migrant is therefore to be regarded not only as a response to the need to improve one's individual condition, but also as a political gesture aimed at challenging that regime of security and inequality that the very boundary stands for. In fact, the more positive and "assertive" depiction of migrant subjectivities embodied in the experience of the *harrag* is markedly different from previous terms such as the *sans-papiers* -an expression originated in the 1990s in France to define the social condition of irregular migrants, marked by the lack of the suitable documents to stay legally in the EU. Rather than insisting on the deprived, victimised condition of migrants- their *lack* of a regular status, their *lack* of documents - the figure of the *harrag* seem to embody new affirmative figures of migrants, who re-claim their strengths and their agency.<sup>35</sup>

In a similar way, this alternative focus on the subject who approaches the borderland of Europe takes the distances from other important theorizations of current Mediterranean mobility, such as Achille Mbembe's necropolitical discourse. By the term 'necropolitics', Mbembe has indicated the decisional power exercised by sovereign institutions over the life or death of oppressed individuals.<sup>36</sup> Applied to the European context, the necropolitical discourse focuses on the power of EU member states to decree whether to rescue and assist migrants and asylum seekers at its borders, or to let them die during the journey. While Mbembe's theorization remains essential to decipher and

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<sup>34</sup> *Borderlands*, p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> See in particular Chapter 1 'Brûleurs et autres aventuriers' in Mazauric, *Mobilités d'Afrique en Europe*, pp. 9-33.

<sup>36</sup> Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p.17.

denounce Europe's privileged role in the current migratory crisis, it is also true that shifting the focus from the lethal politics of sovereign power to a discourse on 'life itself', as Rosi Braidotti has suggested, can lead to a more 'life affirming' vision of current events, in which the alternative figures of resistance that have already emerged, such as the *harrag*, are also taken into consideration.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the experience of the "border burner" not only puts the stress on the re-affirming stance embodied by illegal journeys despite the closure of borders rather than on the lethal politics of the EU, but ultimately offers a much less-Eurocentric perspective on migration in the Mediterranean, making the resistance to hegemonic power, and not the hegemonic power itself, the protagonist of the narrative.

It appears clear that the figure of the *harrag* encapsulates a strong desire for social justice, voiced both by migrants, who re-claim this term for themselves, and by artists, journalists and practitioners backing this heroicizing portrayal. Nonetheless, even if the character of the "border burner" possesses a highly seductive quality, it also seems necessary to problematize the heroicization operated in Maghrebi popular culture and in European migration literature alike. While transforming the illegalised migrant into a resisting character is certainly to be seen as an understandable "last resort" to counter a discourse too often marked by abuses and state violence, such an immortalization of bravery and defiance also has the drawback of rendering the narration less realistic and credible.

This seems well illustrated in the open-ended epilogue of Soleiman's story towards the end of the novel. In fact, after the crossing of the fence at Ceuta, described in dramatic tones,<sup>38</sup> the last internal monologue of the Sudanese character depicts the passage as a triumph

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<sup>37</sup>Rosi Braidotti, 'Bio-power and Necropolitics', published as 'Biomacht und nekro-Politik. Überlegungen zu einer Ethik der Nachhaltigkeit', *Springerin*, 13.2 (2007), 18-23.

<sup>38</sup>'Je m'agrippe au fil qui me fait saigner les mains. Cela n'a pas d'importance. Je veux passer', *Eldorado*, p. 183.

over Europe's closed boundaries: 'Je voudrais sourire car je me sens une force de titan. J'ai sauté sur l'Europe. J'ai enjambé des mers et sauté par-dessus des montagnes'.<sup>39</sup> At this point the narration of Soleiman's point of view is suspended, and the reader is left without indications about his future destiny. However, the European public very easily imagines what will happen to him next: his illegal status will probably lead to arrest and detention, or to a temporary employment in the EU, most likely in the black market. Briefly, it is plausible to imagine that the difficulties for the protagonist are not over, and that hostility and hardship will also mark his stay on the other side of the fence. Thus, Gaudé's choice of leaving the character's story suspended seems to indicate a deliberate attempt to isolate this moment and pay homage to the *harrag*'s transgression as an unstoppable action, even at the price of making Soleiman's adventure feel unrealistic and somehow disconnected from the horizon of expectations of the EU public, who know too well the actual epilogue of many of similar stories in real life. Albeit this decision to interrupt the narration is intended to give back dignity to these struggles through fiction, could it also be read as a kind of spectacularization, which privileges the idealistic and symbolic power of the border burner's heroic figure over its human and contingent features? In such a finale that wishes to look no further than the triumphal moment of the passage, is the tragic reality of illegal crossings sublimated and ultimately confined to the corner of the picture?

Another crucial element that makes *Eldorado* an interesting case study is the representation of European borders. Indeed, the EU external boundaries acquire a prominent role in the narrative: it is the very existence of these physical delimitations that provides a target for the predicament of the border burners, since there would be no need to enter the Eurozone illegally, without the presence of clearly marked

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

liminal zones to establish its “inside” and “outside”. Although the image of the border features incessantly in the migrant’s internal monologues, it is in the finale of the novel that the border and its physical overcoming on the part of the protagonist acquire the dimension of crucial narrative catalysts, conferring a markedly dramatic and heroic weight to Soleiman’s journey. The border crossing represents ‘l’heure de la vitesse et de la solitude’, which can determine the success or the failure after many months of endurance.<sup>40</sup> In fact, in the novel, the border is first of all portrayed in its extremely violent materiality: because it stands in Ceuta as a six-metre-high fence topped with barbed wire, Soleiman and his fellow migrants have to build makeshift ladders to climb it, in a scene resembling the preparation of a warlike attack. Reaching for the upper limit of the fence, this physically harms the protagonist’s hands and makes them bleed.

However, even if the description of the crude materiality of the border is central to this narrative passage, the significance of the crossing goes well beyond the physical overcoming of the fence. In addition to being physical obstacles, in *Eldorado* borders clearly acquire the symbolic function of ‘détroits’ and ‘entre-deux’, of crucial moments of change in the life of the *harrag*, as identified in Mazauric’s analysis.<sup>41</sup> Charged with an archetypal dimension of passage between separated conditions, rather than two continents, the border zones between Africa and Europe become the stage for the emergence of a new conscience of the world for the illegal migrant, who is directly confronted here with the rejection and violence of European authorities. This is clearly the case for Soleiman, whose young age suggests that the crossing also echoes the dimension of a rite of passage. Passing through Europe’s border areas marks not only the entry into an illegal status, but also a transformation from boyhood and familiarity to

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>41</sup> Mazauric, *Mobilités d’Afrique*, p. 129.

adulthood and risk, with the necessity of accepting one's own responsibilities for the future: '[...] si je réussis à passer, qui sera l'homme de l'autre côté? Et est-ce que je le reconnâtrai?'.<sup>42</sup> In his growing-up triggered by such hostile circumstances, the protagonist becomes even more conscious of the hardship of his new condition of unauthorized exile in a foreign land.

Such a "productive" function of the border is indeed highlighted both by Agier, and Mezzadra and Neilson. For the French anthropologist, the specific of the border is to symbolically articulate a binary paradigm between different life conditions and statuses, centring the debate on what the barrier stands for: injustice, exploitation, denied cosmopolitanism.<sup>43</sup> Facing the border and attempting to cross it is therefore not merely an act of aggression towards a denied access, but also a defiance of those policies that perpetuate economic and social inequalities. In fact, as Mezzadra and Neilson underline, by hindering free movement, borders trigger the elaboration of political 'border struggles' on the part of the individuals challenging their presence.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the gesture of "border burning" is also to be read as a productive effect of restrictive immigration policies, since it reclaims the self-determination of those excluded on the other side of the fence, to be regained even at a violent or deadly cost.

The image of the border leads us to the last crucial element of the novel worth analysing here: the representation of Europe and its role in the migrations of Africans across the Mediterranean. Like the majority of literary texts dealing with this topic from a EU perspective, *Eldorado* does not refrain from conveying a specific judgement on

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<sup>42</sup>*Eldorado*, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup> Agier, *Borderlands*, pp. 37-53.

<sup>44</sup>'Only by understanding how the border is productive of subjectivity, rather than acting as a mere limit on already-formed subjects, can we critically understand its capacity to act as a brake on justice as well as a conduit of injustice', Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border As Method*, p. 268.



European attitudes, which in this case seems to be expressed through Salvatore, the Italian protagonist of the story.

Early on in the novel, Salvatore is tormented by the sense of powerlessness experienced by rescuing migrants at sea without being able to avoid their subsequent arrest and repatriation. Morally afflicted, he decides to leave his town and his job, to start a somehow “redemptive” journey to Africa, to experience the migratory hardship in first person. However, quite soon his desire to leave reveals its controversial nature: it is not much about solidarity and redemption, but about his own sense of dissatisfaction that emerges every time he compares his life routine to the “adventurous” and extreme experience of illegal migrants. Somehow the protagonist becomes envious<sup>45</sup> of the hope and energy that pushes young and determined migrants to risk the sea crossing, while he describes them as ‘beautiful of that light given to the look by hope’.<sup>46</sup> The decision to leave is followed by the attempt to become a ‘homme Eldorado’ himself, as he renamed the hopeful illegal migrants on the way to Europe. The first action of his metamorphosis is the symbolic act of burning his papers, typical of the *harrag*’s experience.<sup>47</sup> But compared to Soleiman’s story, Salvatore’s actions seem primarily dictated by a desire of *cupio dissolvi*, an instinctive drive towards a cancellation of his official identity: ‘Il n’était plus personne. Il se sentait heureux. Comme il était doux de n’être rien. Rien d’autre qu’un homme de plus, un pauvre homme de plus sur la route de l’Eldorado’.<sup>48</sup> It is starting from this point that Salvatore’s vicissitudes become highly unrealistic, verging on the ridiculous. If the radical change in the captain’s life originated in the sense of uselessness and guilt, in the following chapters his wanderings appear to lose the connection with the plea of illegal migrants to transform into a mimicry

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Il repoussait des hommes qu’il enviait chaque jour un peu plus’, *Eldorado*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Ils étaient beaux de cette lumière que donne l’espoir au regard’, *Eldorado*, p. 108.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

of the *harraga*'s harrowing experiences: 'Il lui était donné de pouvoir souffler sur les désirs des hommes pour qu'ils grandissent. Il avait besoin de cela'.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, his journey is dictated by a thirst for redemption, but also appears motivated by a personal desire to experience extreme conditions to interrupt the monotonous routine of his daily life. This reading seems legitimised also by the accidental death of Salvatore's story, which appears excessively dramatic to appear credible in the logic of the novel.

An additional aspect that makes Salvatore's journey of dubious interpretation is the emergence of orientalist elements in his point of view, applied both to the migrants and to their journey. Indeed, before leaving Sicily, Salvatore seems to both exoticize and aestheticize the *harg*, overlooking its danger and its motivations to focus only on its "adventurous" aspects. Later on, once his journey has commenced, he feels attracted by the exotic name of an unknown Algerian town: 'Ghardaïa. Il sourit en son esprit. Il aimait ce nom qu'il ne connaissait pas'.<sup>50</sup> From all these details, Salvatore's enterprise indicates not only a fundamental misunderstanding of the reasons pushing migrants to leave their countries, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the character's hijacking of the migrants' stories onto his personal need to recover from guilt and dissatisfaction. This somehow egocentric attitude, ridden with misinterpretations and projections, is typical of the humanitarian gaze thoroughly discussed in Chouliaraki's work,<sup>51</sup> and intermittently resurfacing in solidarity appeals and advocacy art and fiction, including this novel, at least in the way Salvatore is portrayed.

A further element to connote the representation of Europe in *Eldorado* is to be found in the parallel, but constantly separate

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>51</sup> See the Introduction for an overview of Chouliaraki's criticism to contemporary humanitarianism.

presentation of Soleiman's and Salvatore's points of view. An essential aspect in this sense is the narrative crux<sup>52</sup> constituted by the moment of ambiguous encounter between the two characters towards the end of the novel. Here, the two characters casually meet in a marketplace in Algeria, and Soleiman interprets the presence of Salvatore, anonymously kneeling on the floor, as an embodiment of Massambalo, the god assisting migrants in their journeys, which encourages him to continue his migratory passage. Several readings have interpreted this meeting as a symbolic reconciliation between Salvatore and Soleiman, and even as a secular conversion for the Italian character.<sup>53</sup> Yet, the Sudanese character approaches Salvatore only because he believes him to be the migrants' god, whose shadow he would have probably met in someone else if not in Salvatore. Indeed, Europeans hardly feature in his reflections, except later on in the novel, in the face to face with the Spanish border police. In this sense, the migrant's journey remains essentially independent from Salvatore's. An encounter which could be interpreted as decisive and re-conciliating for the two characters, is only apparently so: the protagonists' different itineraries only intersect by chance, and continue each in its own direction. These two parallel stories, both, after all, dictated by personal interests, seem to bitterly acknowledge the issue of incommunicability between the European and the African migrant, each absorbed by his own aims, each left to himself to make sense of the events and of the journey.

Ultimately, both the plot and the morale of the story created by Gaudé remain unclear. Indeed, the ambiguity constantly resurfacing in many passages of the novel leads us to question the actual message

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<sup>52</sup> 'Crux' is defined by Porter Abbott as 'a critical point, often a gap, in a fictional narrative where there is an insufficiency of cues, or where cues are sufficiently ambiguous, to create a major disagreement in the intentional interpretation of the narrative', in H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 231.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Mazauric's analysis of the novel in *Mobilités d'Afrique*, pp. 192-194 and Alexandra De La Sablonnière, 'La Conversion Profane dans *Eldorado* de Laurent Gaudé et dans *Comment devenir un Monstre* de Jean Barbe' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Laval, Québec, 2012), pp. 49-57.

intended by the author. What is even more uncertain, however, is the extent to which Gaudé is conscious of the orientalist misunderstandings vehiculated through his Italian character: is he intentionally creating a parody of European attitudes of humanitarianism, or is he unaware of the controversial layers of meaning conveyed by the novel? In other words, did the author look with irony at Salvatore's story, or did he build such a character as a supposedly positive example of solidarity with migrants and European "redemption"? If *Eldorado* presents an innovative yet heroic representation of the *harrag* in the European literary context, it also communicates an unclear stance regarding the European character, partly absolving and partly ridiculing him.

Finally, Gaudé's novel exposes the ambiguities of choosing the *harrag* as the main characterization for the migrant subject. Indeed, is the "border burner" still the most relevant and representative figure of contemporary migrations in the Mediterranean area? While its powerful symbolism continues to feature in popular culture both in Africa and Europe, it appears that this experience is also being surpassed by more moderated and less idealised visions of the protagonists of these passages. This is the case for many sub-Saharan migrants who reach Morocco and rather than risking the illegal crossing decide to remain there for work and education opportunities.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the discourse on the "European dream" seems to have lost much of its allure on younger generations of migrants, leaving space for other networks of exchange between African countries, very distant from Eurocentric settings. This is in fact a central element in the next case study.

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<sup>54</sup> See for example Houria Alami M'Chichi (ed.), *Un autre regard sur les migrations: Expériences du Maroc* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018). Regarding this alternative take on African migrations and its literary representations, see Mariangela Palladino, '(Im)mobility and Mediterranean Migrations: Journeys 'between the pleasures of wealth and the desires of the poor'', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 23 (2018), 71-89.

### 1.3 Border Dwelling: Ironic Migrations in *Faire l'aventure*

While in *Eldorado* Gaudé aimed at depicting the figure of the migrant as a resolute hero, in *Faire l'aventure* Fabienne Kanor has focused on the migratory journey as an experience of disillusion and growing up for the protagonist. The author is in fact famous for investigating the connections and intersections between identity, migration and the legacies of French colonialism and slavery through the literary medium. For example, her novel *D'eaux douces* (2003) was set between the Caribbean and France in contemporary times, while *Humus* (2009) was inspired by the tragic episode of a group of women jumping off a slave ship in 1774, rather than surrendering to a life in captivity in the colonies. The originality of her texts, which often explore the female condition in different historical contexts, lies in the attempt to bring together her Martinique and French background with a marked interest for West Africa, investigating the relationship between former French colonies and the consequences of imperialism on state and individual identities. In fact, in 2007 she was among the authors that signed the manifesto for a *littérature-monde* calling for a more inclusive approach to the literary production authored by Francophone voices in different countries of the world.<sup>55</sup>

*Faire l'aventure* follows Biram, a Senegalese teenager who leaves his hometown to find better life opportunities in Europe. After years of struggle trying to settle in different parts of Spain, France and Italy, and of living in precariousness because of his illegal status, he will give up his plan and decide to repatriate in Senegal.<sup>56</sup> In 2014, the novel was praised by critics and press, and received the Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe et du Tout-Monde, a prestigious award for creole and francophone fiction, for its poignant depiction of migration as an 'odyssée sans

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<sup>55</sup> Michel Le Bris, Jean Rouaud and Eva Almassy (eds), *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed plot, see Appendix 1.

gloire'.<sup>57</sup> Although the narrative alternates the focalization on the male protagonist Biram to that on Marème, a young girl whom he briefly meets at the beginning of the novel, for the purpose of this chapter I will only focus on the young man's character, since it is his story that is qualified as the typical *aventure* across the Mediterranean Sea.

The protagonist's characterization is indeed the first noteworthy aspect deserving critical attention. Differently from Gaudé, Kanor spent much time with migrants in Senegal and southern Europe to create a credible character for the protagonist of her story.<sup>58</sup> This preparatory work is clearly detectable in the vividness with which the experience of Biram is brought to life in the course of the narrative. Helped by a deeply original style that alternates baroque descriptions, to a witty, sarcastic tone and to lively dialogues in African French and slang, Kanor reconstructs the nuanced development of the character from a naive boy to a resentful and finally disillusioned migrant.

At the beginning of the novel, Biram is presented to the reader as a young and inexperienced teenager, blinded by the idea of a Europe of wealth and opportunities:

Rien ne disait la frontière, sauf le gosse. Ce sursaut des lèvres du garçon lorsque, dérivant vers le large, son regard butait contre la ligne bizarrement solide de l'eau. Le corps fléchi, les mains collées à ses jumelles endommagées, il

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<sup>57</sup> Prix Carbet, <http://tout-monde.com/prixcarbet2014laureat.html> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>58</sup>Biram's wanderings have been reconstructed by the author on the basis of typical itineraries of undocumented migrants whom Kanor has interviewed in Senegal, Spain and Italy. This preparatory fieldwork is reflected in the reconstruction of Senegalese informal French in the narration, particularly in dialogues. In an interview, Kanor affirms: 'J'ai fait une écriture *in situ*, [...] J'ai donc pu me rendre à Tenerife aux îles Canaries, où j'ai rencontré des vendeurs ambulants sénégalais et passé du temps avec eux. Cela m'a permis de prendre la mesure de ce qu'ils vivent. Je suis allée également à Almeria en Andalousie pendant quinze jours. J'ai été hébergée par des émigrés et j'ai même travaillé avec eux dans les serres en plastique à ramasser les tomates et les aubergines. Je suis allée aussi à Rome, et à Lampedusa pour visiter le centre de rétention. Dans ce roman je ne voulais pas rester à l'extérieur des flux migratoires. Je voulais être dans ces lieux. Cela m'a permis de ramener la matière', Philippe Triay, 'Fabienne Kanor: «Faire l'aventure», l'odyssée de l'exil', *La Première*, 24 January 2014, <http://www.la1ere.fr/2014/01/24/fabienne-kanor-faire-l-aventure-l-odysee-de-l-exil-104443.html> [accessed 10 September 2018].

s'entêtait à comprendre comment marchait le monde. [...] À dix-sept ans, Biram n'avait encore rien vécu.<sup>59</sup>

Through his habit of meticulously observing the horizon with his binoculars to look at the sea that separates Africa from Europe, Biram's imagination is fed by the dream of realising his ambitions across that sea, in countries that are unknown to him except for the partial accounts of those emigrants who have later come back to Senegal. Both his frustration for a deprived and corrupted social context and his determination to make new experiences will lead him to attempt the illegal *aventure* like many other men in his native town. However, as the narrative progresses, the idealised attraction for Europe reveals itself to Biram in all its unrealistic nature. Already in the second part of the novel, three years have elapsed, and the reader finds Biram working as an illegal street seller in Tenerife. Indeed, his perception of the migratory experience has markedly changed, especially due to the impossibility of earning enough to pay the smugglers to reach mainland Europe. From this moment in the narration, the protagonist is portrayed in an irreversible change of attitude, from idealization to disenchantment.

In *Borderlands*, Michel Agier has reflected on the emergence of a new figure typical of the reality of EU border zones in the 2000s: the 'borderland man'.<sup>60</sup> Inhabiting the immediate proximities of the EU external or internal boundaries, this living condition is marked by the repeated attempts to trespass those barriers and obstacles preventing access to new life opportunities. While the *harrag* embodied the act of border burning epitomised a more juvenile outburst against prohibition, as poignantly rendered in *Eldorado*, Biram's story in *Faire l'aventure* veritably resembles that of a borderland man whose existence

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<sup>59</sup> Kanor, *Faire l'aventure*, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Agier, *Borderlands*, p. 8.

is markedly by the wandering, or in Agier's terms, 'border dwelling' at the peripheries of Europe, unable to regularize his permit of stay and to improve his everyday condition.<sup>61</sup> As Agier has observed, for the undocumented migrant the barrier is a constant reminder of a denied access, which certainly marks his subaltern experience after each failed passage, but also triggers a new cosmopolitan identity, negatively shaped by the acknowledgement of one's marginality in the global order.

It is indeed in the repeated facing and interaction with the border that Biram's characterization is developed in this novel. The border is not only a major catalyst for the action, but also assumes the role of an omnipresent antagonist in the young man's journey. In fact, while the incipit presents Biram, it also introduces the border as an invisible barrier absent from the landscape but that the protagonist can identify in the 'bizarrely solid line of the sea'.<sup>62</sup> Rather than a physical fence like in *Eldorado*, Europe's barriers are in fact qualified in *Faire l'aventure* as fluid, shifting obstacles, epitomised by the sea between Africa and southern Europe, and by the waters separating the Canaries or Lampedusa from mainland EU. While lacking the dramatic power they possessed in Gaudé's novel, the barriers in Biram's story are qualified in their invisible function of economic marker for the undocumented migrant who, even when he succeeds in entering the EU, is still "bordered off" from basic human rights. As Étienne Balibar has underlined, for the migrant coming from a poor country the border 'is a place he runs up against repeatedly, passing and repassing through it as and when he is expelled', to the point that it almost becomes his dwelling, 'a home in which to live a life which is a waiting-to-live, a non-life'.<sup>63</sup> Year after year, Biram is faced with the reality of a marginal

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Faire l'aventure*, p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. by Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), p. 83.



condition, consisting of lack of access to social services, poor housing conditions and the constant fear of being arrested and repatriated.

As Mezzadra and Neilson have observed, state political boundaries today function as capitalistic filters for labour, attracting in particular irregular migrants who play the essential role of disposable workers in the global market.<sup>64</sup> This only apparent form of economic inclusion is indeed 'differential' and selective, because it paradoxically reinforces their exclusion from the target society, which is perceivable in their prolonged condition of precariousness. In their function of attracting and including workers 'in ways no less violent than those deployed in exclusionary measures',<sup>65</sup> borders symbolize all the political and economic mechanisms aimed at bordering off undocumented migrants.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the young protagonist of *Faire l'aventure*, like thousands of others, manages to reach the Canary Islands, but once there his only chances of employment are confined to the black market because of his irregular status. The outskirts of Europe are thus portrayed as laboratories of new labour conditions, marked by abuse and the absence of workers' rights, as is the case of one of Biram's last jobs as seasonal picker in Southern Italy:

Ses histoires se déroulaient désormais à Tenerife, Kita, Bamako, Naples, Almeria, Madrid, Tripoli, Gao, Djamet, Kidal, Niamey, Tinzaouatine. C'étaient des histoires compliquées. Dans la plupart de ces villes, il s'était bagarré pour survivre.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, Biram's condition remains substantially unvaried in the course of the story, be it in Africa, at the periphery of Europe, which he refers

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<sup>64</sup> Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border As Method*, pp. 19-24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> For the exclusion of irregular migrants from wealthy nations, see Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-persone*, and Jeremy Harding, *Border Vigils: Keeping Migrants Out of the Rich World* (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> *Faire l'aventure*, p. 284.

to as ‘la petite Europe’, or in mainland Europe, ‘la grosse Europe’.<sup>68</sup> His obstinate ‘border dwelling’ will lead him through exploitation and marginalization, and will progressively reveal the social inequality implied in yet another passage, yet another obstacle.

However, such a constant interaction with the border shapes not only Biram’s journey, but also the development of an understanding of his condition as Europe’s “undesirable”. Indeed, Mezzadra and Neilson have pointed out that borders are certainly an obstacle to migration, but also represent the catalyst for the emergence of new resisting subjectivities engaged in a political dissidence towards the border system.<sup>69</sup> In the case of Biram, it is not much the “border burning” but the constant movement in the borderlands of Europe to emerge as a challenge to the inequality embodied by the boundary, reclaiming a right to circulate more freely but also decent living and working conditions. Differently from the triumphal tones of the ending scene in *Eldorado*, Biram’s odyssey is marked early on by a loss of faith in the European dream.<sup>70</sup> It is in his tone of detached sarcasm, reproduced by an internal focalization, that the measure of both his disillusionment and resentment can be detected:

Le Malien le présenta à un autre saisonnier qui le conduisit à un caporal arabe et marché conclu: les bennes à remplir, les douze heures à tirer, vingt euros par jour moins les frais pour avoir le droit de coucher sur du dur, de manger du chaud et de se vider ailleurs que dans une fosse.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Mezzadra and Neilson argue: ‘[...] taking the border not only as a research “object” but also as an “epistemic” angle [...] provides productive insights on the tensions and conflicts that blur the line between inclusion and exclusion, as well as on the profoundly changing code of social inclusion in the present’, Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border As Method*, p. viii.

<sup>70</sup> The itinerary of disillusion from Africa to Europe in the migrant’s experience is indeed a *topos* of recent migration literature and cinema. Other famous examples can be found in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel *Partir* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) but also in Costa-Gavras’s film *Éden à l’ouest* (2011) which will be analysed in the following chapter.

<sup>71</sup> *Faire l’aventure*, p. 303.

In the description of his long period of struggles, first as a street seller, then as a tomato picker, Biram's enthusiastic curiosity for Europe gradually turns into an ironic acknowledgement of his marginal position in the job market and in society at large. His sarcastic reflections seem indeed to reflect his realization that his idea of Europe, the 'grande Europe'<sup>72</sup>, as he calls it, is destined to remain a mirage in the distance, shifting forward at every attempt he makes to reach it. In the end, the young man will never escape his condition of economic, social and juridical marginality.

It is in the emergence of such a bitter detachment that a resistance to Europe's economic system is ultimately expressed. At the end of the novel, the development of a new subjectivity and self-perception as Europe's "undesirable", leads Biram to be voluntarily repatriated to Senegal. Ultimately, the refusal to accept the EU treatment of illegal migrants paradoxically becomes the only way to express his claims. Indeed, Kanor's narration skilfully depicts the protagonist's growing scepticism towards European society, which in the course of the novel develops into a clear-cut resentment towards European citizens. In fact, in addition to symbolising economic exploitation and social exclusion, the anger of being unable to settle in Europe prevents him from establishing social relations with Europeans, reinforcing his perception of an invisible barrier, separation between him and the French, Spanish or Italian people he interacts with.

This element is already evident from the first description of European characters in Tenerife, where Biram sells souvenirs to tourists on the beach: in particular, female holiday-makers are portrayed in their extreme frivolity, in their childish and coquettish attitudes, suggesting a poignant criticism of European consumption and tourism culture. For example, when Biram meets H  l  ne, a middle-aged French woman, and she invites him for lunch, he reacts aggressively and

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

uncompromisingly: 'Je n'ai pas votre temps. Je dois aller travailler, fit-il de cette voix qu'il appelait pour Blancs puisqu'il ne s'en servait qu'en leur présence, lorsqu'il cherchait à les intimider'.<sup>73</sup> Even when, later on, the same woman tries to understand his experience of migration and to imagine his odyssey to the EU, he makes fun of her. Certainly, Biram's constant criticism of Europe's citizens prevents him from seeing that among them are many sympathetic people, like the woman who falls in love with him and helps him reach France. Albeit Biram's perspective is inevitably partial and dictated by his negative experience as an exploited migrant, through these descriptions Kanor clearly exposes all the frivolities and hypocrisies that mark a certain European attitude of indulgence towards migrants, well represented by wealthy and bored holiday makers.

By the end of the novel, Europe ultimately appears to Biram as an inhospitable country for migrants. Indeed, the Senegalese character qualifies the continent as a 'Europe de malades'<sup>74</sup>: his previous idealization seems to have left the place only to disgust and hostility for a society which appears to be dominated by economic privileges and superficiality.<sup>75</sup> This vision of Europeans as spoilt and indifferent individuals is also clearly represented in a scene at Tenerife port, when a group of migrants who survived a shipwreck are disembarked in front of the tourists. As ironically observed by Biram: 'Que c'était triste, et surtout problématique puisque l'Europe n'avait plus de place et plus d'argent pour les accueillir'.<sup>76</sup> Biram's growing frustration is then summarised in an exclamation towards the end of his journey: 'Merde, s'écria-t-il enfin en tapant sur la table avec son poing. On est pas des chiens quand-même. On devrait pouvoir vivre là où on veut vivre. Ou

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>75</sup> 'Dans le monde du vieux chéri, il fallait des millions et des voitures particulières pour se déplacer, une maison à petites foulées près d'une plage pour prendre un bain de mer, un peignoir pour se sécher, un lit plus une parure de draps pour s'endormir. Dans la vie du vieux chéri, il n'y avait ni aventure, ni erreur, ni hasard', *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

alors, ou alors que chacun reste dans son pays!'.<sup>77</sup> The hardship of the protagonist's experiences in Europe contributes to his inability to go beyond the "border" separating him from Europeans and he starts *bordering* himself, as it were, in a solitary fortress, surrounded by 'quelque chose de vertical, de dur et d'infranchissable. Un mur qui grimpait au ciel'.<sup>78</sup> Like in Gaudé's *Eldorado*, the migratory journey also seems to become a way of realizing the impossibility of an understanding between Europeans and African migrants, understanding that is hindered by an economic and social structure that tends to consolidate inequality and to suffocate any attempt to challenge the *status quo*.

In this regard, the colonial legacy, and issues of neo-colonialism are prominent elements that constantly resurface as open wounds in the context experienced by Biram. It is not accidental that the opening scene of the novel takes place at 'la Signare', a ruined slave house on the coast near Mbour, where Biram often goes to look at the sea.<sup>79</sup> The persistence of such a place in the Senegalese coastal landscape violently introduces the element of slavery and exploitation which, supposedly abandoned two centuries earlier, seems to re-appear under new forms in the global economy. Later on in the novel, the condition of contemporary Senegalese citizens is explicitly associated with the subjugated status of colonised people by the old professor in Biram's village, who curses the citizens for passively accepting the passage of the Paris-Dakar rally through the area - an initiative that he clearly regards as a neo-colonial imposition. Referring to Mbour's inhabitants as the new 'damnés de la terre', the professor evokes Frantz Fanon's reflections on exploitative violence to describe the Africans' lack of resistance to Western cultural and economic hegemony.<sup>80</sup> From this

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41. See Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris : Maspero, 1961).

perspective, Biram's *aventure* is also a chance to confront the typically Western values of wealth and success that the protagonist partly embraces and partly rejects until his decision to return to Senegal. Thus, Biram's own attempt to rebel against his precarious condition can also be read as the voicing of a more general resentment towards the unresolved power dynamics between Europe and Africa.<sup>81</sup> While migratory movements today respond to the individual's need to improve one's living conditions, they nonetheless remain dictated by the exigencies of transnational capitalism, in which Western powers still dominate the scene.

In this regard, for Biram migration actually becomes an experience that increases his knowledge of the world. It is true that, as Agier has observed, the use on the part of migrants of the euphemism *aventure* to indicate their passage and precarious settlement in Europe is a way of providing the journey with a heroic dimension, a strategy to assert one's control on the act of migrating beyond the uncertainty that dominates the itinerary to Europe.<sup>82</sup> However, the "adventure" for the character corresponds first of all to a change of attitude, from the attraction for an ideal elsewhere to a more realistic, disenchanted re-visitation of his journey as a doomed enterprise. As the *aventurier* described by Bredeloup, Biram has faced the challenges of exile and exploitation, and after many years of 'border dwelling' has grown up to mature a different perception of his identity. In the final scene of the novel, Biram falls asleep outside the office for the applications of voluntary repatriation. He starts dreaming of being back in his hometown, and of observing the border, as he used to do as a boy:

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<sup>81</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), and Jeremy Harding, *Border Vigils*.

<sup>82</sup> 'To elaborate strategies, to imagine oneself as an adventurer, to understand that one is entering a test of a cultural labyrinth by crossing borders – these are all so many clear expressions of a cosmopolitan consciousness, but one very different from discourse on the joy of being 'global' or on the cosmopolitan aesthetic', Agier, *Borderlands*, p. 78.

Il rêvait qu'il grimpait l'escalier tordu de la Signare. [...] Il s'accoudait au balcon, une paire de jumelles neuves devant les yeux [...] il plisserait les yeux pour viser la frontière. Bah, pas longtemps, il ne se casserait plus la tête à la chercher. La foi l'avait plaqué, la mer l'avait battu, mais ça va, ce n'était pas la fin du monde.<sup>83</sup>

It is through this gaze of the grown-up *aventurier*, who looks disenchantedly and sarcastically at Europe but also at his own condition, through a new pair of binoculars, that Kanor prompts the readers to look at the egalitarian claims left unheard by Europe's immigration policies and invites them to reconsider, in Agier's terms, 'the cosmopolitan condition today as a whole'.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, the ironic stance of the protagonist should not only be read as the acknowledgment of a migratory failure, but also as a new determination to look beyond the European *el dorado*, and perhaps to build a viable alternative future back in the origin country.

Biram's story, similarly to the human itinerary of countless migrants like him, shows how the project of a shared global citizenship is still a utopian dream in today's world of multiplying borders. As Bauman affirms, migrants, together with asylum seekers and refugees, remain the 'waste products of globalization' whose exploitation appears an accepted practice of the economic system.<sup>85</sup> By focusing on the border as a symbol of inequality and on the "adventurer" as a dissident subjectivity first challenging and then accepting the impossibility of being included in the host society, *Faire l'aventure* presents a deeply bitter vision of border crossings undertaken by African travellers. Nonetheless, in the description of Biram's critical point of view, Kanor imaginatively brings to life the transformation of the figure of the migrant from a disposable, illegalised migrant into a resisting subject

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<sup>83</sup> *Faire l'aventure*, p. 364.

<sup>84</sup> Agier, *Borderlands*, p. 74.

<sup>85</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, p. 66.

critically conscious of his condition. By giving space to the marginalised migrant's identity articulated through the relationship to the border, Kanor appears to invite European readers to challenge conventional representations of African 'adventurers' and to sympathize both with their struggles for more inclusive social policies on the part of EU states, and also with the disenchanting resistance symbolized by their journey of return.

#### **1.4 The 'innumerevoli': Migrants as Nameless Victims in De Luca's *Solo andata***

While many recent French novels have managed to include alternative representations of illegal migrants, the same cannot be said for contemporary Italian literature. In fact, the Italian texts of the 2000s seem to privilege an engagement with a central concern of the country's migration debate: the key role of Italy in sea rescue operations as the first European port of call for African migrants. Just as I will illustrate for the case of cinema in the next chapter, Italian writers have used the literary expression to primarily defend a principle of hospitality towards displaced people to condemn the interruption of extensive search and rescue operations for migrants in distress at sea, and to expose the poor asylum and reception management once they are disembarked in Italy. Re-stating the moral necessity to welcome them is precisely the aim of Erri De Luca's *Solo andata*, on which this last section focuses.

Besides authoring over forty publications of both prose and poetry, dedicated to a wide variety of themes, Erri De Luca is also known for his support of human rights and civil rights. A recent example in this sense was his public advocacy in defence of free speech in the case of



No TAV demonstrations.<sup>86</sup> His participation in a large number of campaigns and appeals over three decades contributed to his public visibility and led him to be referred to as one of Italy's most engaged contemporary authors. It is in the light of this public presence that *Solo andata*, dedicated to such a highly politicized theme as illegal migration, should be considered. Since his literary production has been translated in over thirty languages, it is in fact his wide European public to be the 'implied reader' of the long poem, to use Wolfgang Iser's term,<sup>87</sup> thus showing the author's intention to participate in the Italian and international political debate and to raise empathy in his readership. Indeed, as a poetical utterance imaginarily pronounced by the migrants themselves, *Solo andata* invites to adopt a more human and long-sighted approach to transnational movements on the part of Italy and Europe at large.

*Solo andata* is composed in the format of a long poem divided into 26 sections, through which the author reproduces the point of view of a group of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Africa to Sicily.<sup>88</sup> While the representations of the border and of Europe are after all incidental in the long poem, it is the characterization of the

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<sup>86</sup> De Luca's support to civil rights and environmental causes is reflected in his journalistic and literary works, but also in his public presence and campaigning for free speech. For example, in 2013 he received public attention when he was sued for allegedly instigating the No TAV movement to resistance and sabotage of the project of a new rail line connecting Italy and France (he was then acquitted two years later). See Stephanie Kirchgaessner, 'Writer's acquittal in Turin-Lyon rail line case a victory for free speech', *Guardian*, 19 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/19/erri-de-luca-acquittal-turin-lyon-rail-line> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>87</sup> See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>88</sup> Starting from the desert crossing in North Africa, the lyrical voice retraces the extenuating conditions of the sea crossing, during which food and water are scarce and several migrants die. Intercepted by the Italian coast guards, the travellers are rescued from the sea and are given primary assistance. The strenuous journey concludes with an uncertain ending in which the migrants are waiting in a detention centre for a verdict on their possibility of remaining in Europe. The long poem has also been adapted in music by the folk group Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino in 2015, and a music video directed by Alessandro Gassmann was released in the same year.

migrant to emerge as the most interesting and ambiguous aspect in this lyrical re-elaboration. In particular, an evident feature is the use of a strong lyrical pathos across the different sections. Indeed, if in *Faire l'aventure* and *Eldorado* the reference to the figures of the *harrag* and *aventurier* constituted an attempt to go beyond the victimized portrayal of migrants, in *Solo andata* the dramatic nature of the migrant's story seems not to be re-elaborated, but rather to be insisted on to evoke a sense of pity in the public. By doing so, the inflated representation of the migrant as a victim is not challenged, but rather exploited to cause an emotional effect on the audience. This leads to important consequences for an ethical assessment of this work: to what extent does the poem succeed in offering an alternative image of migrant subjects, or vice versa reinforce established perceptions?

The major element showing the ambiguity of such a literary treatment is precisely the way in which the migrant is identified in the long poem. The text focalises on the internal point of view of the protagonists of the journey, in a first-person lyrical voice either plural ('we') or singular ('I'), which take turns in recounting the experience of the crossing. Thus, the narration is firstly uttered by six voices, then two voices, a chorus, and finally one voice, representing an interior monologue of the migrants as protagonists. This generates a powerfully evocative effect, since it confers a sense of urgency and immediacy to the experience of migration, as if in a subjective testimony communicated to the Italian reader in all its emotional freshness. The dramatic condition of the migrants is particularly highlighted by the insertion of a chorus recalling the dimension of Greek tragedy but also attributing the resonance of an epic endeavour to the migratory journey ('Siamo deserto che cammina, popolo di sabbia, | Ferro nel sangue, calce negli occhi, un fodero di cuoio').<sup>89</sup> While such a highly poetical characterization certainly succeeds in involving the reader on an

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<sup>89</sup> *Solo andata*, p. 24.

emotional level, it must be observed that the image of migrants as a nameless crowd remains unvaried from the mass media portrayals. Instead of recurring to the clear identification of single individuals, as it is usually the case in much of migration literature, here De Luca reproduces the typical depiction of illegal migrants as a generalised group, only intermittingly able to speak individually.

Another strategy used to bring to life the experience of the group of migrants is then the repeated reference to Western literary and religious tradition, in moments of explicit or implicit intertextuality. Firstly, the tradition of the Greek tragedy is evoked through the use of the chorus of voices summarising the events. Then, the text includes echoes of the Italian and classical literary tradition, with a direct reference to Dante and Homer: 'Portiamo Omero e Dante, il cieco e il pellegrino'.<sup>90</sup> Another more implicit reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy* is made through the use of a lexicon echoing *canto* XXVI, which presents the famous reminiscence of Ulysses' shipwreck at sea and of the divine punishment for having dared to cross the Pillars of Hercules. Being the *Divine Comedy* one of the bases of the Italian literary tradition, this reference evokes a scene that is almost certainly familiar to the intended reader, thus triggering associations with the mythical hero who ventured to start a journey towards the unknown, a major figure of the Western canon. However, to this regard, urgent questions arise: is the reference to European literature the most suitable way to dignify the migrants' journey, or is it perhaps just the easiest device available to appeal to the European readership? Is comparing the modern clandestine with Ulysses or Dante after all a way of distancing oneself from the historical contingencies and sublimate, or aestheticize these contemporary experiences? Indeed, recurring to such cultural mediation seems to deny a specific to the African migrant's story, as if

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

this alone would be insufficient to raise the reader's interest and empathy.

Along the same lines, even more problematic appears to be the reference to the Christian tradition, especially evident in the second part of the long poem. Indeed, this influence clearly derives from De Luca's experience of translating different books of the Bible into Italian, which can be detected in the long poem, both in terms of lexicon and of symbolic horizon. Besides the numerous echoes from the Old Testament, such as in the depictions of the migrants as 'scacciati dalla terra'<sup>91</sup> which links contemporary mobility to an archaic past of displacement and persecution, a striking element is the likening of the migrants to the figure of Christ in the New Testament. In fact, the chorus describes the migrants as 'vita da sfruttare', exploitable and disposable life, and the narrating voice affirms: 'servitevi di noi',<sup>92</sup> echoing sacrifice and expiation. However, it is in the final verses that the reference to Christ is made explicit:

Non potete sbarazzarvi di noi.  
Uno venuto molto prima ha detto  
A nome di noi tutti: "Va bene muoio,  
ma in tre giorni risuscito e ritorno".<sup>93</sup>

This direct connection to the figure of Christ resurrecting further stresses death as an ever-present element in the experience of contemporary sea crossings, and, in particular, establishes a parallelism between a Christ who is about to be crucified, and the unfair treatment experienced by migrants today. Such a comparison suggests the author's intention to elevate the tone of the composition to a spiritual dimension and to reflect on displacement and suffering as recurring experiences in the human condition. At the same time, it problematically associates migrants with a scapegoat figure enduring

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

injustice and suffering, and therefore it once again reinforces the image of their subaltern position in the global power dynamics, which is already so common in mainstream media.

Besides the parallel with the figure of Christ, in other moments of the long poem migrants are portrayed in a highly victimised manner. A first example is noticeable in the presence of the chorus, which amplifies the narrative utterance and creates powerful effects of solemnity and pathos but also results in a tone of lamentation, as if producing an emotional narrative uttered by a humiliated group. The impression of a de-personalising representation seems also validated by the identification with landscape elements and inanimate materials - the migrants are 'deserto', 'pietanza',<sup>94</sup> 'polvere alzata'<sup>95</sup> - or again the lyrical recourse to synecdoche. In fact, the narrating voice insists on body parts connected to the strenuous crossing and physical exhaustion: 'gli altri seguono il tallone cha precede'<sup>96</sup> or 'mani'<sup>97</sup> and 'noi siamo i piedi'<sup>98</sup>. These figures of speech, which present a fragmentary depiction of migrant subjects, all insist on their endurance of degrading treatment and on their physical attributes. Finally, the denouncing voice explicitly associates the condition of the travellers to an animal state, in statements like 'noi siamo bestiame' or 'non siamo né da latte né da carne. | Ma siamo da lavoro'.<sup>99</sup> These actions and attributes obviously aim at denouncing the de-humanising status to which the travellers are condemned by the closed border, but such a condition is also ultimately left unchallenged in these verses.

Similar de-personalizing and emotional descriptions contribute to portray the protagonists as a nameless group of unfortunate travellers, a risk that was avoided in Kanor's and Gaudé's novels by

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

means of a detailed characterization of a single migrant subject. If statements of determination and resilience, which can be associated with the figure of the *harrag*, are actually included in the long poem ('da qualunque distanza arriveremo [...] quelli che vanno a piedi non possono essere fermati' or 'non potete sbarazzarvi di noi'),<sup>100</sup> they seem nonetheless outweighed by the fact that the migrants are already detained as 'cattle in a pen' ('è recinto e noi siamo bestiame').<sup>101</sup> This tendency to de-personalization and even de-humanization inevitably evokes Agamben's concepts of 'homo sacer' and 'bare life' as mere survival.<sup>102</sup> In Agamben's analysis, 'homo sacer' is the individual deprived of any rights and of citizenship status who can be expelled from the state territory and arbitrarily persecuted by the authorities. The state of exception that applies to the 'homo sacer' makes it possible for the sovereign power to reduce him or her to bare life, a condition of marginalization from the community and of absence of individual entitlements. In *Solo andata*, a parallelism with the notion of bare life seems strongly suggested both by the likening of the migrant to Christ as a sacrificial scapegoat, and by the description of migrants reduced to an animal-like state, or in Chouliaraki's terms to 'the hopeless destitution of the refugee's body',<sup>103</sup> without any possibility of rebelling against European authority. When such an emotional insistence on the body, on the suffering and on the subaltern position of migrants is deployed, even in denunciatory terms, is it possible to affirm that similar literary treatments depict migration and its protagonists with more positive notes than mainstream media? Is an alternative portrayal achieved, or actually just reproduced?

Indeed, it is difficult to establish to what extent De Luca's verses should be interpreted as an attempt to rehabilitate the characterization

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>102</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>103</sup> Chouliaraki, 'Between Pity and Irony', p. 15.

of the migrant, or more as an intention to merely reflect on the lyrical and pathetic potential of this figure of contemporary culture. While redressing the migrant's media portrayal was a matter of priority both in *Eldorado* and *Faire l'aventure*, *Solo andata*'s major concern remains that of denouncing Europe's and Italy's complicit role in Mediterranean shipwrecks and their inadequacy as host countries for struggling migrants. Indeed, Europe features in the narrative as a closed territory, emblemized in the action of the 'doganieri del Nord'<sup>104</sup> rescuing people at sea and then detaining them in reception centres, but also in the accusation voiced by the migrants: 'non siamo bagagli da spedire e tu nord non sei degno di te stesso'.<sup>105</sup> However, it is the contiguity of the migrant's victimised portrayal with the stereotypical mass media representation, rather than the criticism towards European border policies, that ultimately dominates the foreground of the narrative.

As Chouliaraki has underlined, portraying the 'suffering other' as a victim is always a politically charged operation.<sup>106</sup> Her reflections on humanitarianism and post-humanitarianism are particularly useful to identify those contexts in which, despite even the noble intentions of social commitment, the representation of the other provided in a visual or verbal communication act does not challenge the unequal powers between the two parts, but only make them easier to detect. The mechanism of pity certainly belongs to this representational dynamic, since it further highlights the vulnerable position of the subjects evoking our empathy, thus disempowering them of any other way of representing their own story. This process seems to be undergoing in the perspective adopted in *Solo andata*, in which the subaltern condition of illegal migrants is reproduced in compliance with established relation patterns between the rescuer and the rescued,

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<sup>104</sup> *Solo andata*, p. 30.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>106</sup> Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*, p. 2.

without really questioning the reasons for their disparity.<sup>107</sup> Certainly, in the course of the poem Europeans are accused for their lack of solidarity, but migrants on their part are still described as passive subjects to be rescued, as ‘countless’ individuals, and as scapegoats, thus insisting on the element of pitiful assistance as the very basis of a Eurocentric humanitarian approach.

De Luca’s long poem was clearly written as an act of literary commitment in support of migrants’ rights. Conceived as an imaginary testimony of illegal travellers experiencing the hardship of contemporary migration, it undoubtedly constitutes an original creative response to the de-humanising depiction of these journeys offered by mainstream media. For example, it is a rare case in which the pronoun “we” is used in Italian literature to designate the migrant community, in an exclusive way, separately from Europeans. At the same time, I have attempted to show that because of this attempt to raise empathy in the reader, *Solo andata* leaves the highly stereotypical image of the suffering migrant borrowed from the public sphere substantially unquestioned. In this sense, the long poem eloquently illustrates the problems associated with finding innovative angles to represent the migrants while avoiding equally, if not more, disempowering perspectives on their story, also signalling the difficulty of going beyond the traps of an established humanitarian imaginary for such highly mediated phenomena as illegal crossings.

### **1.5 Migration Literature as Ventriloquial Engagement**

In *Borderlands*, Michel Agier has observed that ‘freedom is the precondition for ‘world citizenship’, since one has to be able to cross

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<sup>107</sup> See Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008) and Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*.



borders in order to experience the world and others, to emerge from oneself, from the assigned boundary of identity'.<sup>108</sup> In this light, the migrants' attempts to cross borders can ultimately be read as nothing less than the struggle to acquire what Hannah Arendt called 'the right to have rights' - a set of entitlements not found by migrants in their home country but hopefully acquirable somewhere else, perhaps just across the sea.<sup>109</sup> As I have tried to illustrate in this chapter, recent migration literature has frequently reflected on the limited freedom of movement experienced by illegal migrants at the doors of Europe. Indeed, these fictions denounce the extent to which those who cross borders are increasingly qualified as Europe's "undesirable" and are therefore rejected time after time by a sophisticated border regime that prevents any challenge to inequality advanced by the protagonists of these journeys.

An aspect that I have highlighted in the previous pages is the dimension of social engagement that the three case studies aimed at conveying. The idea that literature can bring to life the experience of the illegal migrant is indeed the common rationale shared by *Solo andata*, *Faire l'aventure* and *Eldorado*. In the intention of their authors, these texts become alternative platforms to express dissent towards the present European policies concerning unauthorised migration, but also to re-direct the reader's attention to the experiences lived by migrants, still underexplored in the mainstream public sphere.

By creating fictional stories in which the unauthorised migrant is protagonist, Kanor, Gaudé and De Luca have been among the first authors to include alternative visions of the over-meditized Mediterranean crossings in the space of European literature, with the aim of destabilizing pre-established portrayals of migrants issued from media contexts. The three texts analysed in the chapter present

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>109</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Shocken, [1951] 2004).

markedly different strategies that invite the public to empathize with the main characters. In *Eldorado*, the alternation between a first-person and third-person narration highlights the distance separating the experiences of Soleiman and Salvatore respectively, also reinforced by a narrative crux that conveys a sense of incommunicability between the two characters. Soleiman emerges from the novel as a determined hero, who successfully crosses the fences in Ceuta after enduring the dehumanizing conditions of the journey but is faced with a future of struggles on the other side of the border due to his illegal status. In *Faire l'aventure*, the close-up on Biram's point of view shows his protracted struggle to reach the 'grosse Europe', up to the protagonist's decision to abandon his European dream. The sarcasm emerging from his interior monologues conveys a bitter criticism of the host society and reproduces Biram's growth from a naïf teenager into a disenchanted man who finally refuses a condition of marginalization and exploitation and returns home. In the two novels, choosing to draw inspiration from the contemporary figures of the *harrag* and the *aventurier* has proven to be a successful strategy to revive the migrant's characterization in European literature. I have underlined that both the act of symbolically 'burning' the border and the prolonged 'dwelling' in the borderland of Europe are attempts to reclaim an individual agency over the illegal itinerary but can also be read as forms of resistance to the European border regime that reinforces social and economic inequalities.

While the two French texts present highly individualised portrayals contrasting the image of the migrant as a victimised subject, De Luca's long poem seems to add lyrical power to the established humanitarian discourse on migration without managing to subvert it. If by means of his intertextuality the long poem legitimizes the suffering condition of migrants and elevates their experience to the tradition of epic and tragedy, it still does not challenge the idea of the migrant as a victim of external circumstances. In fact, in *Solo andata* the migrants' sea crossing is elevated to a moving monologue that invites the reader

to see migration as a recurring element of the human condition, but that substantially does not challenge the image of the migrant as vulnerable and dependant on European assistance, and rather invites the reader to feel pity for his or her misadventure, in a somehow cathartic process. For this reason, the long poem is a fitting example of the subtler ways in which an attempt to re-dress the portrayal of a “suffering other” can produce even more disempowering results for migrants. The humanitarian portrayal of De Luca’s text is after all not very distant from the stereotyped portrayal, constantly re-appearing in the public discourse and in the mass media, which sees the relationship between European and migrants conducted according to the established roles of “rescuers” and passively “rescued”, thus replicating the power dynamics exerted by the global North over the global South.

Albeit the portrayal emerging from Kanor’s and Gaudé’s novels appears decidedly more empowering for their protagonists, these depictions too are questionable: by heroicizing the migrants, the risk is in fact that of abandoning a credible narration of their story, and to sublimate their figure to the point of losing the contact with their lived experiences, which remain marked by injustice and violence, often without the possibility of a “heroic” outcome. As Chouliaraki has rightly underlined, representing migrants as heroes is certainly at the extreme opposite of portraying them as victims. At the same time, it also incurs in the danger of hinting to an ‘individual sovereignty’ which unfortunately most of the time is not available to displaced people under the current global balance.<sup>110</sup> That too, therefore, constitutes a deceiving adaptation of their experiences, which should be equally avoided even when it serves the purpose of positivizing their portrayal in the public debate.

Indeed, besides their engaged intentions, I argue that these texts demonstrate the complexity of advocating for the “other” by

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<sup>110</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki, ‘Between Pity and Irony’, p. 29.

reproducing his or her story via literary fiction. Although in all three cases the decision of “borrowing” a gaze while at the same time “lending” the space of European literature constitutes an important act of social commitment in support of migrants’ claims, at the same time, such acts are riddled with ethical ambiguities. All these stories remain European re-elaborations that inevitably replicate, to different extents, established trends of representations just as they attempt to detach from them. As the corpus of migration literature grows, the difficulty to create alternative representation paradigms, different from those which portray the migrant in the “corner” of the hero or the victim, appears increasingly perceivable. In fact, as long as the majority of these portrayals derive from a European perspective, the narrative actually remains controlled and orchestrated by EU authors. In this sense, the gesture of “borrowing” the migrant’s voice can indeed be identified as an act of engaged “ventriloquism”: albeit for a purpose of advocacy, the migrant’s internal point of view is only fictionally recreated. This is in fact what has rendered these texts so interesting: the unique encounter between the migrant character and the European author for the narration of contemporary border struggles. Such an encounter, however, remains ultimately fictional, or “ventriloquial”, and therefore problematic: not only because it reveals the lack of access to migrants to the cultural channels by means of which they could narrate their own perspective, but also because they confirm the difficulties of European voices to go beyond a Euro-centric perspective and to credibly imagine alternative points of view on reality.

The impasse generated by the ethical limits of EU representations on one side, and the actual scarcity of direct voices narrating the experience of migration from an internal perspective on the other, seems destined to persist in the literary field, at least for the next decade. However, initiatives such as the Archivio Memorie Migranti in Rome have timely taken up the challenge of providing funding and training to migrants and refugees residing in Italy in order

to encourage the publishing of creative re-elaborations of the migratory experience, this time “voiced” and written by their actual protagonists.<sup>111</sup> The gradual emergence of these projects appears promising in a cultural realm such as literary fiction, in which migrant perspectives are still strongly underrepresented.

While it is evidently not exempt from the risk of “cornering” the migrant’s story to stereotyped or idealised representations, European literature remains a fertile space for stimulating the emergence of new perspectives on mobility as a pressing social issue linked to global inequality rather than as a threat to international security and state welfare. In the desire to engage with the phenomenon of Mediterranean migrations as they continue to occur, a strong element of social commitment can be detected that aims at impacting Europe’s reading public and dynamically interact with the present reality. By “lending” the space of European literature to host the migrants’ claims, Kanor, Gaudé and De Luca, like numerous other authors, take a position on the political and cultural debate on migration to Italy and France. In particular, the imagined, borrowed voice of the migrant elaborated in these three texts calls for a new insight on the journey experience that is formulated not around the lines of national security, but along the need for a more humane approach to freedom of movement today as an essential part of the individual’s ‘right to have rights’. Despite the ethical impasses of its positioning, such literature can still become a powerful sounding board for migrants’ claims in which inequality can be denounced and different social scenarios can be imagined. By creatively reflecting on the border as a powerful symbol of separation and incommunicability between Europeans and Africa migrants, these texts can invite the public to reflect on the many ways in which inequality is structured every day at the external boundaries of Fortress Europe, and

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<sup>111</sup> Archivio Memorie Migranti, <http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

to re-think our interactions with others in a shared, but still profoundly unequal world according to a refreshed principle of solidarity.

Similar dynamics between social engagement and problematic representations are at stake in recent migration cinema, which will be the object of the next chapter.



## 2. Visualising the Migrant's Story: Representing Migration in Italian and French Cinema of the 2000s

'[There is] no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk'. (bell hooks, 'Marginality as a Site of Resistance', 1990, p. 343).

Together with literary fiction, cinema is another field of cultural production which has witnessed, both in France and Italy, the flourishing of representations of illegal journeys in the last decades. Indeed, since the 1990s both countries produced numerous cinematic works dedicated to the experience of contemporary migration, with a particular attention for the *topos* of the 'hindered journey', as Laura Rascaroli has observed.<sup>1</sup> These cinematic stories too, like the novels analysed in the previous chapter, revolve around the difficulty to reach Europe as a final destination of the journey, but, rather differently, they often privilege the point of view of the members of the host society, presenting the ethical dilemma between acting in solidarity with migrants or instead in conformity with the present immigration laws. This ever-growing body of films, which several critics have attempted to define,<sup>2</sup> can be broadly referred to as migration cinema, because its primary focus is to reflect on what it means to witness, from a European

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Rascaroli, 'On the Eve of the Journey: Tangier, Tbilisi, Calais', in *Open Roads, Closed Borders*, ed. by Michael Gott and Thibault Shilt (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Like for the case of literature, migration cinema has been identified thematically (*cinema della migrazione* in Italian, *cinéma de la migration* in French) or based on the director's migratory background (*cinema migrante* and *cinéma migrant*), for some critics to be considered as a veritable genre on its own in the contemporary European panorama. In this respect, Italy and France follow the European trend of what Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg have termed 'migrant and diasporic cinema' and Isolina Ballesteros 'immigration cinema' (see Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg (eds.), *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Isolina Ballesteros, *Immigration Cinema in the New Europe* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015)).



perspective, the migratory journeys in today's historical and political context.

Differently from the recently theorised pushes towards transnationality in EU cinema, a considerable corpus of migration films has focused on specific issues of national politics and policies, which although increasingly relevant to other geographical contexts, remain heavily nationally connoted.<sup>3</sup> In fact, inspired by their respective national political debates, recent Italian cinema has focused on sea journeys and the theme of rescues in the Mediterranean, with films such as Emanuele Crialese's *Terraferma*, Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare*, Andrea Segre's *L'ordine delle cose*, while French films have repeatedly looked at the condition of clandestine migrants in the north of France, with works like Philippe Lioret's *Welcome*, Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre*, Emmanuel Finkiel's *Nulle part terre promise*.<sup>4</sup> Since the majority of these films benefitted from the public funding of national and regional governments, some succeeded in gaining the spotlight of the political and media debates, especially in the press and on television, and became, to a certain extent, popular products on contemporary migrations which were viewed and discussed by thousands of

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<sup>3</sup> See Nilgun Bayraktar, *Mobility and Migration in Film and Moving Image Art: Cinema Beyond Europe* (London: Routledge 2016).

<sup>4</sup> It is in the early 1990s that the first films explicitly addressing the theme of migration are produced: with a few notable European precursors, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) and Xavier Koller's *Journey of Hope* (1991), French and Italian cinema start presenting stories of marginalization, institutional racism and violence, social divides experienced by migrants and refugees directed or already residing in Europe, with a special focus on the increasing restrictions of immigration laws and the consequent condition of illegality for many non-European individuals. Most notable examples of migration cinema, which in the French context often overlaps with the definition of *beur* cinema, are Abdellatif Kechiche's *La faute à Voltaire* (2000), Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011), and more recently Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Une saison en France* (2017), while in Italy widely known examples are Gianni Amelio's *L'america* (1994) and Marco Tullio Giordana's *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (2005). For more examples, see Michael Gott, *French-Language Road Cinema: Borders, Diaspora, Migration and 'New Europe'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Hakim Abderrezak, *Ex-centric migrations: Europe and the Maghreb in Mediterranean Cinema, Literature, and Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016); Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: the Art of Talking Back in a Destination Country* (Toronto, London: University of Toronto Press, 2005) and Sonia Cincinelli, *Senza Frontiere: l'Immigrazione nel Cinema Italiano* (Rome: Kappa, 2012).

spectators. For example, at the time of distribution in French film theatres, *Welcome* reignited the discussion on French immigration laws and the bureaucratic limbo faced by migrants and refugees stranded around the Calais harbour. The discussion culminated in a confrontation between Éric Besson, the then Minister of Immigration, Integration and National Identity (a much-contested Ministry which was then suppressed the following year), and Lioret, who publicly reiterated in an open letter his accusation towards the government's management of the migratory situation in north France.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their visibility in the contemporary debate, these films have been often dismissed or overlooked by academic research, perhaps precisely for their relatively mainstream nature. Nonetheless, as Guido Rings has recently remarked, it is this corpus of films that currently remains the one 'with the widest audience and impact' on European society.<sup>6</sup> If this fact alone makes it urgent to analyse the messages explicitly or implicitly contained in these films, there is at least another major reason: due to its visual nature, cinema configures itself as pre-eminently relevant to the pre-existing debate on mediatized images of migration. Although films are composite works of art combining both audio and visual elements, it is in fact for their use of moving images that they become objects of a wider analysis of the ways in which other people's suffering is made available and visible to the spectators.

Such fundamental reflection, which has occupied philosophers and critics since the aftermath of World War II, focuses on the potentiality and limits of images in post-Holocaust, postmodern times.<sup>7</sup> In the late 1960s, philosopher Guy Debord claimed that, particularly with the advent of television, the proliferation of visual information in

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<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lioret, 'De simples valeurs humaines ne sont pas respectées', *Le Monde*, 10 March 2009, [http://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2009/03/10/de-simples-valeurs-humaines-ne-sont-pas-respectees\\_1166002\\_3476.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2009/03/10/de-simples-valeurs-humaines-ne-sont-pas-respectees_1166002_3476.html) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Guido Rings, *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema: Imagining a New Europe?* (New York, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> With regard to the debate on post-Holocaust representation in the Arts, see Modlinger and Sonntag (eds.), *Other People's Pain*.

Western society had transformed the world into a ‘spectacle’ of excess, relegating the viewers to the role of passive, distant spectators who can observe atrocious scenes while remaining in the safety of their living room.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, an aspect that seems to emerge unanimously from more recent studies on visibility is precisely that images have become so “tired” that they risk losing the ability of carrying their own meaning.<sup>9</sup> When Nilüfer Demir’s disquieting photos of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler found lifeless on the shore near Bodrum after a shipwreck, made world news on 2 September 2015, their shocking vividness momentarily mobilised politicians and citizens in favour of migrant and refugee rights.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, such a powerful reaction did not prevent an even stricter closure of EU borders in the following months, nor did it avoid yet another dismantling of the Calais refugee camp, or the rising death toll in the Mediterranean Sea. Once again, public indignation seemed to turn into indifference to the spectacle of such tragic events, and into a growing sense of distance and powerlessness of the European spectator towards the hardship of the migrant’s journey. In the era of social media, when migration is constantly mediated and made excessively “visual”, is it still plausible to maintain, with Hannah Arendt, that making injustice visible inevitably ensures a reaction in the viewer?<sup>11</sup> In fact, is it not more realistic to acknowledge, with Susan Sontag, that ‘no “we” can be taken for granted’ when witnessing the view of other people’s suffering?<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a lesson to be learned from the intermittent coverage of migration tragedies in the news seems to be

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<sup>8</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Black & Red (London: Notting Hill Editions, [1967] 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the role of visual culture in postmodern era, see Nicholas Mirzoeff’s *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999) and *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> See Patrick Kingsley and Safak Timur, ‘Stories from 2015: how Alan Kurdi’s death changed the world’, *Guardian*, 31 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/31/alan-kurdi-death-canada-refugee-policy-syria-boy-beach-turkey-photo> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1958).

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 6.

that there is no guarantee that such a visible suffering will induce a shift in public opinion and policy makers.

This scepticism towards the ability of images to mobilize their viewers is precisely the point of departure of Lilie Chouliaraki's reflections on postmodern spectatorship. She claims that in the post-Holocaust, post 9/11 era, the position of the public has evolved into what she calls an 'ironic' spectatorship, namely a disenchanted viewing of the struggling "other" portrayed in mass media, photography and advertisement, a viewing conscious of its powerlessness to effectively help the subject of those images of social injustice, war or natural disasters.<sup>13</sup> Such sense of inurement also evokes the compassion fatigue typically found in the humanitarian appeals, charity campaigns and, increasingly often, in the news; in fact, it derives both from the very nature of media images, which are extrapolated from their context, and from the omnipresence of such pictures in the public space: on an advertising board on the train, in the street, in the press, on the internet. Since the mere act of viewing images of people in pain does not automatically make us able to mobilize in their favour, Chouliaraki observes that an increasingly common trend in communication is the shifting focus from the sufferer to the distressed viewer of such suffering.<sup>14</sup> The viewers' interest seems increasingly to be directed not so much on what those images show, but on the self-gratifying possibility to act in solidarity with the subject portrayed and feel better about themselves too.

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<sup>13</sup> Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> See Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship of Suffering*. With regard to this, see Jerome Phelps, 'Why is so much art about the 'refugee crisis' so bad?', *Open Democracy*, 11 May 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/jerome-phelps/refugee-crisis-art-weiwei> [accessed 10 September 2018].

See also Moze Halperin, 'Ai Weiwei, M.I.A. and the Risks of Co-Opting Crisis: Refugees Through the Eyes of Celebrity', *Flavorwire*, 2 February 2016, <http://flavorwire.com/558960/ai-weiwei-m-i-a-and-the-risks-of-co-opting-crisis-refugees-through-the-eyes-of-celebrity> [accessed 10 September 2018].

An emblematic example of the self-gratifying tendency identified by Chouliaraki in the humanitarian sector can be detected in Ai Weiwei's controversial re-enactment of the tragically famous picture of Alan Kurdi's corpse lying on the shore (figure 1). The protagonist of this extremely provocative work of art is in fact no longer the Syrian toddler, but the artist himself who, like many individuals across the globe, felt at the same time moved and powerless faced with such spectacle of injustice and, in a typically postmodern move, focused on his personal experience of witnessing such a dramatic scene.



**Figure 1. Artist Ai Weiwei portraying himself in the pose in which drowned toddler Alan Kurdi was found on the shore near Bodrum (© Rohit Chawla).**

This tendency towards displaying the benevolence of the spectator, of the artist, and of the witness in general, is certainly caused by a fatigue of compassion, generated by the inflation of such representations, but also by the very representation fatigue which they denounce. In fact, the crucial issue appears to be not so much the illegal migrants' *in*-visibility in the news, as their *hyper*-visibility, typical of postmodern culture, which risks transforming images of suffering into a numbing and sterile spectacle of pain. As excruciating images of

migration become ever more visible and more available, the focus moves onto the Europeans who witness them, and on their struggle with the sense of guilt and powerlessness.

Such a fatigue generated by the hypervisibility of migrant tragedies at the EU border zones determines that two risks are intermittingly resurfacing in the alternative visibility sought after by directors of migrant cinema: firstly, the risk of inducing in a sentimentalist rendition of the migrant's journey, insisting on the dramatic nature of his or her condition, and of the sense of helplessness felt by EU citizens who are unable to intervene in their favour. In these films, just like in De Luca's *Solo andata*, pathos is used as a trigger to shock and emotionally involve the audience. Secondly, the danger of trivialising the migrant's story, using it as a mere narrative device to contextualize the story of the EU protagonists of the film. A blatant example of this issue is Michael Haneke's *Happy End* (2017), in which the refugee crisis in Calais is a distant reference in the background, while the central focus is occupied by the development of a bourgeois family drama. Both these risks, either avoided or incurring to different extents in the case studies of this chapter, inevitably haunt the representational horizon of a migration cinema predominantly directed by EU filmmakers, problematizing the effectiveness of such films to make justice to the migrant stories developing in contemporary Italy and France.

The ambiguous effects of viewing images of distant suffering have also been recently addressed by Slavoj Žižek, who has denounced the hypocrisy behind the recurring pose of benevolence towards migrants and refugees found in the public sphere. In his views, Europe is currently experiencing a 'double ideological blackmail': on the one hand, part of the public opinion and policy makers calls for a closing of the EU external borders and ignores the plea of refugees, position for which many xenophobic movements actively campaign; on the other, some European citizens promote the welcoming and inclusion of

migrants regardless of their legal status and cultural background.<sup>15</sup> Both sides, he claims, defend flawed positions. In particular, he attributes the latter position to the 'Left liberals', who to him correspond to 'the greatest hypocrites', those who 'play the beautiful soul, superior to the corrupted world while continuing to get along in it'.<sup>16</sup> Responding with blind benevolence, he claims, is not so much a genuine reaction of altruism or solidarity, as a self-centred desire to feel good about our compassionate actions without attempting to truly impact the global system which remains, however, the root cause of transnational migration. Although extreme and debatable, Žižek's reflections, in line with Chouliaraki's argument, invite one to be suspicious of the displays of solidarity expressed by Europeans, particularly in a time where slogans such as 'No Borders' seem so distant from the development of EU migration policies as to appear increasingly simplistic, if not deliberately utopian.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of such complex debates on visibility and solidarity, what should be thought of contemporary cinema addressing migrations to Europe? In a historical moment of both representation and compassion fatigue, can cinema contribute to create alternative perspectives, or does it risk becoming itself a form of mere spectacularization? What forms has social commitment taken to advocate for migrants' rights in the filmic language? Because of its quintessentially visual nature, cinema too appears invested by the same representation tiredness which I have just illustrated. At the same time, extending the debate on the spectacularized images of migrants' suffering to cinematic representations is a worthy endeavour, since these visual narratives fruitfully complicate the major concerns about

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<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail*, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* See also Slavoj Žižek, 'The Non-Existence of Norway', *London Review of Books*, 9 September 2015, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/2015/09/09/slavoj-zizek/the-non-existence-of-norway> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>17</sup> See Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border As Method*, pp. 266-68.

authorship and social commitment detectable in the “migrant’s corner” of the EU public sphere.

Firstly, representing the other’s story in cinema is in fact, from its very start, a venture into minefields. European migration cinema, like the contemporary literature examined in the previous chapter, appears to be marked by a paradox: on the one hand, there is the impending risk of appropriating the story of the other, or even exploiting it, to transform it into something else; on the other, the urgency to produce films which, as acts of witnessing of this historical moment, attempt to mobilize society and to stress the many ways in which migrants’ and refugees’ rights are being overlooked. While this tension is detectable in all fields of representation, a distinguishing feature of recent migration cinema is the frequency with which encounters between migrants and Europeans are represented on the screen. However, a predominantly European authorship is controversial not only because it stresses once again the cultural hegemony exercised by the EU in the Mediterranean context, but also because it appears to influence the adoption of a certain gaze onto the story, for example with the insertion of an excessive *buonismo*, an indulging, “goody-goody” attitude of the filmmakers towards their characters and of the European protagonist towards the migrant individual. Not only does this perspective appears to show once again the migrant as a victimized subject dependent on Europe’s assistance, but it also somehow renders heroic the figure of the European who takes the side of the migrant against restrictive immigration laws.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, as Isabel Santaolalla has stressed, this position considers cinematic stories of encounter

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<sup>18</sup> Similar views were expressed by Imed Labidi, who stressed how Lioret’s *Welcome*, and more generally cinematic attempts to present the other’s experience, tend to reproduce Europe’s hegemonic stance with regards to contemporary mobility and that, consequently, most European directors still privilege banal narratives in which the benevolent choice of the “welcoming” protagonist overshadows a more accurate rendition of the migrant’s point of view (Imed Labidi, ‘Welcome: An Insight into the Landscape of Contemporary French Consciousness’, *Sense of Cinema*, June 2011, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/welcome-an-insight-into-the-landscape-of-contemporary-french-consciousness/> [accessed 10 September 2018]).



between Europeans and non-European migrants as mere narratives of catharsis both for the European protagonist of the story and in the European spectator watching it.<sup>19</sup> Similarly to what Chouliaraki and Žižek affirmed, such stories would stop being about the other, and start being about how Europeans feel about his or her story. Consequently, this critical position considers these films ill-suited to effectively address migration, because of their inevitable European positioning which diverts the focus from the character of the migrant to that of the witnessing European.

While the voices of the protagonists of contemporary migrations urgently need to be heard, the attempts to “lend the camera” to the migrant can lead to just as controversial results, as in the recent case of the documentary *Les Sauteurs* (Those Who Jump, 2016). Indeed, with the aim of providing a more “inner” perspective on the topic, German director Moritz Siebert and Chilean-German director Estephan Wagner decided to entrust Abou Bakar Sidibé, a Malian migrant, with the task of filming the weeks spent stranded in proximity of the border, with the countless attempts to cross it. Although Sidibé was later acknowledged as co-director of the documentary, and even if he claimed that he had agreed to film, ‘but only if [he] could do it in [his] own way’,<sup>20</sup> the film betrays a certain ‘staged authenticity’ in its final editing, operated only by Siebert and Wagner, which raises questions to the genuineness of an actually shared authorship with the migrant.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the artificial recreation of an inner point of view of the “other” remains another

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<sup>19</sup> Isabel Santaolalla, ‘Body Matters: Immigrants in Recent Spanish, Italian and Greek Cinemas’ in *European Cinema in Motion*, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> Maeve Shearlaw, ‘The wrong side of the fence: a Malian refugee on trying to reach Europe’, *Guardian*, 14 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/14/malian-refugee-on-his-journey-to-europe> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Other attempts have tried to let the migrants’ experiences emerge, such as the example of the Archivio Memorie Migranti, which provided training and funding to Dagmawi Yimer, an Ethiopian refugee arrived in Italy, director of the 2010 documentary *Soltanto il mare* (Nothing but the Sea). Regarding the concept of ‘staged authenticity’, see Dean MacCannell, ‘Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 79.3 (1973), 589-603.

recurring risk of trying to present migration stories to the public, at the opposite end of the spectrum from solely taking into consideration European perspectives on the EU “migration crisis”.

The other essential aspect to consider in relation to migration films is the notion of social commitment. To this regard, a more reconciliatory position on the potential role of cinema in the current migratory debate is expressed, among others, by Steffen Köhn in *Mediating Mobility*.<sup>22</sup> His reflection highlights the fundamental role of visual arts in countering flattened media portrayals of the suffering ‘other’, and particularly stresses the active role that feature films and documentaries are playing in maintaining the visual representation of illegalized migration at the forefront of the political debate.<sup>23</sup> France and Italy, indeed, boast a long tradition of films dedicated to social issues, as opposed to merely entertainment films: in the genre of melodrama and realist cinema, both national cinemas developed their specific traditions of narrating injustice and violence, and of advocating for human rights. After the fading out of traditionally-conceived cinema *engagé* and *impegnato* in the 1970s, in line with a turn to disengagement from reality and disillusion with the political potential of artistic expression, the 1990s also witnessed the emergence of new forms of socially committed cinema. This corresponded, in Martin O’Shaughnessy’s words, to ‘a disappearance of the old, universalizing leftist dramaturgy of struggle’ in French cinema in favour of a non-unitary engagement with specific political causes.<sup>24</sup> Similar

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<sup>22</sup> Steffen Köhn, *Mediating Mobility: Visual Anthropology in the Age of Migration* (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Martin O’Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film since 1995* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn, 2007), pp. 2-3. Jennifer Burns too uses the same image of fragment to denote the trends of ethical commitment in Italian culture of the last thirty years, and by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug in the introduction to *Postmodern Impegno*, who identify the emergence of a more disillusioned, ‘postmodern’ form of engagement in the Italian artistic production since the early 1990s. See Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative (1980-2000)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in*

observations were made about Italian cinema of the last thirty years, during which filmmakers addressed political and social debates in renewed and postmodern forms of cultural *impegno*.<sup>25</sup> In fact, looking at recent migration films authored by Europeans from this perspective, these too can certainly be considered as acts of engagement with contemporaneity, an element which remains, as Benoît Denis claimed, the prerogative of all committed art.<sup>26</sup> The priority of filmmakers such as Kaurismäki, Lioret or Crialese is indeed the commitment to denounce the abuses experienced by displaced individuals across Europe, and to lend their cinematic products to the voicing and showing of exemplary stories of injustice and struggles generated by the closure of EU borders. However, are such “good intentions” sufficient to make their films ethical representations of the migrant’s journey, or are they nonetheless to be seen as hegemonic appropriations of the other’s journey?

This chapter looks at three films which contribute, each with a specific poetics, to the debate on the role of visual representations of migration circulating in Europe. The first section will analyse *Terraferma* and the ways it engages with the media spectacle of witnessing illegal journeys across the Mediterranean Sea; the second section will compare *Terraferma* with Costa-Gavras’s *Éden à l’ouest* (Eden is West), showing the strategies put in place by their directors to criticize the dehumanization of the migrant often found in the public sphere; the third section will consider Philippe Lioret’s *Welcome* as a close-up on the encounter between the illegal migrant and the members of the host society. In the last section, I will draw my conclusions on

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*Contemporary Italian Culture*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Bern, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Regarding political engagement in Italian cinema, see Christian Uva and Giancarlo Lombardi, *Italian Political Cinema: Public Life, Imaginary, and Identity in Contemporary Italian Film* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> See Benoît Denis, *Littérature et Engagement* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000). For a reflection on the relationship between cinema and ethics, see Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

these films' accomplishments and problematic aspects, summarising the different results obtained by such re-elaborations of the migrant's story into cinematic narrative fiction. As I have already stressed, the three films I focus on are part of a varied, ever-expanding corpus of cinematic representation on the topic; however, my choice derives from the fact that they aptly illustrate the most urgently contentious aspects of visually engaging with stories of migration from a European point of view, at a time of hypervisibility of victimised or stigmatized migrants in the media.

### **2.1 Aesthetic Drifts: Crialese's *Terraferma***

In the last ten years, Italian cinema has repeatedly focused on what it means to witness clandestine journeys across the Mediterranean through mediated images. For example, the documentary *Soltanto il mare* (Nothing but the Sea, 2010) directed by Dagmawi Yimer, Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barraco looked at the discrepancy between the media representation of migrant boats arriving in Lampedusa and the director's experience of disembarking on the island as a refugee.<sup>27</sup> In Andrea Segre's *L'ordine delle cose* (The Order of Things, 2017) instead, the images of migrants being trafficked and then detained in Libyan prisons are made intermittently visible to the Italian protagonist, and therefore the spectators, to raise the question of what measures should Europeans adopt to face such migrants' rights violations. Indeed, it is the harrowing contrast between the images of abuses and torture in Libyan prisons, captured in broken sequences by hidden cameras, and the scenes from the life of safety and ease experienced by the Italian character and his family, that Segre creates a powerful denunciation of Italy's and Europe's responsibility in the atrocities endured by migrants

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<sup>27</sup> See Johan Schimanski and Stephen F. Wolfe (eds.), *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), pp. 82-83.

attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. However, perhaps the most internationally renowned film has been Gianfranco Rosi's documentary *Fuocoammare* (Fire At Sea, 2016), winner of the Golden Bear at 66<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival, which entwined the life of locals in Lampedusa with the tragic search and rescue operations for migrants in distress in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>28</sup>

In *Terraferma*, Crialese's central concern is not so much the representation of a migration story unfolding on a Sicilian island, as an aesthetic reflection on what should be shown to the audience, and how, precisely in light of the migrants' hypervisibility in the media. This film, in fact, was conceived by the Italian filmmaker as the concluding chapter of a trilogy on human movement, commenced in 2002 with *Respiro* and then continued with *Nuovomondo* (Golden Door, 2006), which made him widely known to the international public. If exile and displacement were indeed already among two of the director's privileged *topoi*, in *Terraferma* Crialese measures his minimal yet aesthetically compelling style against the more specific theme of clandestine migration, with the intention of countering media representations of Mediterranean crossings and directly engaging with the Italian political debate of the early 2000s.<sup>29</sup>

The story directly engages with the ethical dilemma experienced by the members of a Sicilian family who need to decide whether to hide in their house an Ethiopian asylum seeker illegally travelling to northern Italy. Early on in the film, teenager Filippo and his

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<sup>28</sup> Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016), set in Lampedusa, epitomised the ethical position of the 'rescuer' focusing on a doctor in Lampedusa and on the daily life of Italian coastal guards involved in search and rescue operations in the Sicilian Channel. See Emma Wilson, 'From Lampedusa to the California Desert: Gianfranco Rosi's Scenes of Living and Dying', *Film Quarterly*, 71.3 (2018), 10–20.

<sup>29</sup> One of Crialese's landmark stylistic elements is the inclusion of surreal sequences, which confer a dreamy atmosphere to his films. For example, in *Nuovomondo*'s finale (2006) the protagonists arrive by boat to Ellis Island and are portrayed swimming in a sea of milk, symbolizing the migrants' expectations of abundance in the new land their immersion in an unknown environment. The visionary quality of these scenes, which seems to give weight to the hopes and fears of the protagonists, can also be detected in *Terraferma*, with particular reference to the representation of the sea.

grandfather, living on a remote Sicilian island according to a traditional fishermen's culture, witness a shipwreck and save Sara, an Ethiopian refugee, who is about to give birth, from the sea, together with her children. This act, and the following clandestine permanence of the woman in their house, assisted by Filippo's mother, Giulietta, will make the family face a series of legal and emotional consequences, since it is considered a crime to rescue illegal migrants at sea.<sup>30</sup>

Just like Segre's *L'ordine delle cose* in 2017, *Terraferma* was released at a highly topical moment in Italy. In fact, in 2011 the debate on Italy's role in the recurring migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea was already central in the public and political discussion, making part of the public opinion call for the necessity to implement rescue operations to protect human lives, while others stressed how this fell outside of the Italian government's responsibility. If the film's plot cannot be considered particularly original, the way in which Crialesè's dreamy poetics questioned the trite representation of illegal migrants typically found in the news, combined with the explicit invitation to act in solidarity with them, made *Terraferma* one of the Italian films most appreciated by critics and public. Because it gave voice to a considerable part of the public opinion concerned for the many individuals at risk in the illegal sea crossings, denouncing the indifference with which such events were addressed by part of Europe's political leaders, Crialesè's fourth feature film was met with a standing ovation the first time it was presented at the 2011 Venice Film Festival. Indeed, as years pass, the story narrated in *Terraferma* does not cease to be relevant to the Italian and European political context. On the contrary, it establishes a tight connection with the closure of the Italian harbours to NGO boats rescuing migrants decreed by the Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini in July 2018, which was meant to communicate on an international level that Italy was no longer available as a first safe harbour for asylum

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed plot, see Appendix 2.

seekers. The story of Sara in Crialese's film bears much resemblance to that of many displaced individuals caught today in a bureaucratic limbo in the waters separating north Africa and south Europe, waiting for the governments of Libya, Italy, or Europe to decide whether to ignore them, arrest them or rescue and resettle them.

However, a major characteristic of *Terraferma* appears to be a paradoxical tension between how it engages with its context of migratory events on the one hand, and how it re-elaborates and somehow takes the distance from it on the other. From the beginning of the film project, the director's priority was indeed to create a visual response to the dehumanizing portrayal of migrants as crowds of nameless, victimised individuals often diffused by the Italian press. In fact, the news was the main source of inspiration for the genesis of the film, which bears a close relationship with the events of the few previous years: it was only after reading in the news the story of Timnit T., an Ethiopian refugee survived from a Mediterranean shipwreck, that Crialese finalised his script with Vittorio Moroni. It was then after arranging to meet Timnit by contacting Laura Boldrini, then spokesperson for the UNHCR, that Crialese also chose her to impersonate the woman refugee Sara, whose story is also very similar to Timnit's own autobiographical experiences.<sup>31</sup> If in a sense his film directly derives from the representations of migrants seen in the news, at the same time Crialese underlined in an interview that his film was an attempt to abandon the alarmist, inflated, news-like treatment of contemporary migration stories to offer them an innovative visibility through cinema.<sup>32</sup> In another interview he affirmed that the film's goal

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<sup>31</sup> The boat on which Timnit T. had begun the Mediterranean crossing remained at sea for three weeks, and she was one of the six survivors out of the original seventy-nine passengers. See William Spindler, 'Award-winning film exposes the drama of mixed migration in the Mediterranean', *UNHCR*, 15 February 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2012/2/4f3be42e6/award-winning-film-exposes-drama-mixed-migration-mediterranean.html> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>32</sup> 'La cronaca era tutto quello che sapevamo di dover evitare, un bagaglio da rielaborare e trasformare, per uscire dal linguaggio televisivo e cronachistico', Stefania Ulivi, 'Migranti e italiani in cerca di Terraferma', *Cinema e TV*, 4 September 2011,

was to achieve a 'cinema of transcendence', in which stories of human suffering abandon their contingent dimension to acquire a different kind of visual significance.<sup>33</sup> Such a complex and even contradictory agenda of aesthetic engagement alternating with a distancing from the social reality of migrations appears well exemplified, in the film, by the adoption of a non-human perspective on the events shown to the spectator, which alternatively zooms in on the protagonists or leaves them out of the story and the frame.

From the very first frame, *Terraferma*'s rhythm is in fact marked by the discreet and yet tangible presence of an extradiegetic gaze. If all cinematic works are filtered through the artificial eye of the camera, which is indeed a distinguishing feature of the cinematic medium, in Crialese's film this external gaze is not only the inevitable look cast from the camera, but rather appears to reproduce an imaginary point of view belonging to natural, inanimate elements, in particular the sea. Intermittently recurring in the film, this gaze observes and "reflects" on the unfolding human vicissitudes, progressively suggesting what could even be interpreted as nature's own reading of the story. This gaze is cast from the initial scene, which opens with an underwater shot of the sea in daylight, a few metres under the surface (figure 2). A boat passes, trailing a long fishing net which is then closely investigated by the moving camera, from the bottom to the top. In the background, the spectator can hear the noises of currents and waves, while the net moves in the water and adjusts itself until its tangles surround and entwine the camera. In fact, it is by following the nets up to the water surface that the spectator is introduced to their owners Ernesto and Filippo, the two Italian male protagonists.

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[http://cinema-tv.corriere.it/cinema/11\\_settembre\\_04/ulivi-crialese-terraferma\\_6e63b696-d6f5-11e0-8117-f5a7da88e267.shtml](http://cinema-tv.corriere.it/cinema/11_settembre_04/ulivi-crialese-terraferma_6e63b696-d6f5-11e0-8117-f5a7da88e267.shtml) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>33</sup> See *Italiens à Paris*, 'Interview to Emanuele Crialese', 13 March 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3i3M\\_RLnqYQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3i3M_RLnqYQ) [accessed 24 May 2015].



If such a shot alludes to the themes of imprisonment and obstruction - major elements marking both Sara's and Giulietta's human itineraries here symbolized by the tangles of the nets on which the camera operates a close-up - it also seems to suggest that this gaze constitutes an independent scrutinizing entity which detaches itself from the characters' stories and adopts a more distant vision of these events. This becomes most evident in another scene towards the end of the film, in which the camera explores the seabed near the island's shore, constellated by objects lost by migrants during crossings and shipwrecks: a toothbrush, a shoe, a passport, a plastic bottle. With the slowness conveyed by the reduced speed of movements in the sea, these underwater scenes seem to suggest another rhythm to the story, which allows the viewer to interrogate, by following the camera, the narrative elements which are here shown in a more careful, focused mode hardly possible in a news report, but also "our" own act of gazing at these scenes from the position of European spectators who, like this gaze suggests, can choose to either remain close or distance themselves from the scene represented.



**Figure 2.** In the first scene of *Terraferma*, the camera focuses on some fishing nets, introducing the motif of entrapment and obstacles.

However, the casting of such a gaze also plays a crucial role in focusing the spectator's attention on the sea and how humans interact with it. Since the majority of these impersonal camera gazes are cast in proximity to, or from within, the water, the sea becomes a narrative motif through which the events in the story are articulated. As Crialese underlined, his attention for the sea derives from the specificity of this element, in which bodies acquire 'a different weight'.<sup>34</sup> In fact, in *Terraferma* the sea truly appears as a site of exposure of different human destinies, which are made visible as individuals find themselves in proximity to water. As Zygmunt Bauman commented in 2009, the tension between tourists and displaced people (whom he generically refers to as 'vagabonds') is the 'principal division of the postmodern society' determined by the individual's freedom of choice and their ability to act upon their life journeys.<sup>35</sup> Such a different condition experienced by people drowning and people diving, mediated by their attempt to escape or by their enjoyment of the open sea, is indeed a *topos* constantly featured in migration cinema (for example, it is clearly alluded to also in *Welcome* and *Éden à l'ouest*). However, in *Terraferma* this bitter contrast is skilfully epitomised in two prolonged sequences in the film: the first is the moment in which Sara is first presented to the viewer, waving in the sea to find assistance after she has jumped from the precarious dinghy into the open sea (figure 3, left). The second is the scene of a group of holiday makers lively dancing on a boat and then all happily starting a diving competition at sea (figure 3, right). If the former struggles to stay afloat, the latter can afford to play in the sea, to regard it as mere amusement. Thus, by insisting on people's relation to the water, the extradiegetic gaze in *Terraferma* visually exposes and denounces the economic and social disparity in the

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, 'Tourists and Vagabonds: Heroes and Victims of Postmodernity' (Wien: Institut für Höhere Studien, 1996), p. 14, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/26687> [accessed 10 September 2018].

enjoyment of basic human rights such as the right to safety and protection: it is in proximity to the tiny island surface that the activities of thoughtless tourists on the one hand, and of migrants as vulnerable ‘vagabonds’ of the Mediterranean on the other, converge and reveal their conflicting coexistence.

In a similar way, this gaze also makes visible the interlacing metaphors established by the elements of sea and land. By obsessively showing the watery surfaces in opposition to the island’s territory, this perspective underlines how the protagonists are torn between the law of the land, represented by human laws and the criminalizing of sea rescues on the part of citizens, and the law of the sea, which traditionally commands to assist any human being in distress. At the same time, sea and land also embody opposite meanings: while the sea also represents danger and precariousness for migrants and refugees, the *terraferma* (mainland) referred to in the title appears to symbolize everyone’s struggle for better living conditions. As Ernesto claims towards the end of the film before heading to Sicily together with Sara, the mainland awaits them (*‘la terraferma ci aspetta’*). Despite the constant reference to both elements, it is nonetheless the sea which dominates the scenes, suggesting to the spectator the urgency to act in favour of individuals in difficulty. In this sense, the extradiegetic gaze successfully generates a visual refrain on the sea which seems to bring the over-exposed media debate on Mediterranean crossings back to basics: in such times when primary assistance is denied by security measures, maintaining the focus on the sea silently continues to evoke the duty towards the other in search of a safe mainland.



**Figure 3. The opposition between migrants at sea (left) and tourists (right) on holiday is a recurring theme in Criallese's *Terraferma*.**

If the adoption of such an impersonal gaze plays the essential role of redirecting the attention to the “law of the sea” as an imperative of solidarity, at the same time it also seems to suggest a certain distancing from the very events it shows. Indeed, Criallese's aim of ‘transcending’ through cinema the current migratory crisis also signifies that *Terraferma* risks becoming an aesthetic reflection drifting away from the same burning urgency it attempted to address as a socially committed film. How should the filmmaker's declaration of wanting to ‘re-elaborate’ migration events be read? Is it perhaps also an admission of the impossibility to tackle the ethical dilemmas of casting a deeper gaze on stories of suffering from a European perspective? Could this gesture then be compared to the spectator's withdrawal on himself or herself, investigated by Chouliaraki and also detectable in Ai Weiwei's re-enactment of Alan Kurdi's drowning?

Precisely in this tension between watching and diverting the gaze lies the unresolved nature of the film, which, similar to the migration novels analysed in the previous chapter, takes the story of an illegal journey as the point of departure for the elaboration of a personal poetics, but also risks getting too distant from the initial motivations of solidarity which inspired that artistic work. Criallese's film, therefore, also crucially testifies to the problematic dimension of looking at dramatic events from the vantage position of European directors and spectators, who can decide the extent to which other people's tragedies can be shown or watched, and when the focus should move on other

visions, including that of a more aestheticized interpretation of those same stories.

On a similar note, other questions are generated by at least two other problematic aspects which can be detected in *Terraferma*. Firstly, besides the aforementioned impersonal gaze, the film privileges the perspective of Filippo and Giulietta: in this sense, it can be seen as an Italian story, rather than a story of contemporary migrations. Indeed, the refugee Sara is always represented “through the eyes” of the Italian characters, who can be considered as the actual protagonists of the film. This is suggested also by the fact that Sara is introduced to the spectator after over thirty minutes in the film, long after the islanders have been identified as the main characters. *Terraferma* can then be regarded mainly as Filippo and Giulietta’s experience, leaving less space to the development of the migrant character, to her psychology and her perspective on the situation. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, this kind of film actively lends itself to the risk of heroicizing the figure of the European, who, against all odds and despite his or her own economic and social issues, decides to assist the vulnerable migrant. If this portrayal suggests that acting to help migrants responds to a moral duty, it also stresses, perhaps excessively, the “do-gooder” or even “white saviour” attitude of the European characters, thus raising the question: is *Terraferma* ultimately more about their experiences of empathetic witnesses, than about the actual migrant’s story?

Such issues not only remain unsolved in the film, but also appear unresolvable for any film aiming at representing the other’s experience. Ultimately, up to which point can an external, European point of view render justice to the migrant’s experiences, without altering them and transforming them into a European matter? The usefulness of analysing a film such as *Terraferma* is then also to provide a chance to reflect on “our” own European gaze and on what it implies and generates, even when it is in solidarity with the migrant individuals on which it is cast.

Bearing in mind these controversial aspects, the following section will discuss more positive outcomes of the filmic re-elaboration operated in *Terraferma*. In fact, comparing it with the case of *Éden à l'ouest*, I will show that both Crialese's and Costa-Gavras's work address in different but equally effective ways the issue of the portrayal of the migrant character in response to their more stereotyped media depiction.

## **2.2 Zombies and Magicians: the Figure of the Migrant in *Terraferma* and *Éden à l'ouest***

As previously observed in this chapter, a common aspect emerging from much of migration cinema is the director's intention to re-evaluate the figure of the displaced individuals from its dehumanised or victimised depiction commonly found in the media. The priority of both Crialese's and Costa-Gavras's films is in fact to reflect on the severe effects that criminalising migration to Europe can have on the lives of migrants. As Hannah Arendt observed back in 1951,<sup>36</sup> citizenship still is the main access point to human rights. Therefore, the condition of those citizens of failed states who illegally find themselves in the EU border zones cannot but be dramatic, since they fall outside the responsibility of one country or another and risk becoming, in Alessandro Dal Lago's words, 'non-persone' excluded from society.<sup>37</sup> However, this reduction to 'non-persons' generated by restrictive immigration policies, which is in turn often echoed in the language of the media, is not the only trend of representation found in the public sphere: indeed, the other constantly re-emerging feature is the depiction of migrants and refugees as dangerous, unscrupulous individuals disrupting the Europeans' routine and invading their safe space.<sup>38</sup> This is the portrayal propelled by

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<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, [1951] 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Dal Lago, *Non-persone*.

<sup>38</sup> Regarding the 'war' on immigration and the construction of the migrant figure in xenophobic rhetoric see Carr's *Fortress Europe* and Agier's *Borderlands*.

xenophobic movements campaigning to preserve national identities from a supposed “assault”, or “contamination”, on the part of migrants belonging to different ethnical groups and cultures - those same far-right movements which advocate for the closure of both the EU external and internal borders to protect from the arrival of “bogus” asylum seekers.<sup>39</sup> However, it suffices to think of former UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s reference to the refugees and migrants stranded in Calais as a ‘swarm’ to realize how such rhetoric is not confined to extreme movements but, on the contrary, is becoming increasingly normalised and accepted in the public debate.<sup>40</sup> As Hanif Kureishi recently claimed, the migrant has been more and more described as an ‘alien’, an undead, who will invade, colonize and contaminate, a figure we can never quite digest or vomit’, similarly to an ‘unslayable’ zombie in a video game, on which collective fear converges.<sup>41</sup> A crucial element of this alarmistic portrayal remains its racial connotation, as Lola Young has observed.<sup>42</sup> Still deeply imbued with a colonial rhetoric on racial miscegenation, this fear of contact reveals the silent stereotyping which

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<sup>39</sup> These rhetorical constructions around the threat posed by foreign migrants are certainly not new, if compared with examples of the anti-immigrant propaganda in the US against the arrival of Chinese labour workers which spread the myth of the “yellow peril” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or more recent examples such as the xenophobic discourse elaborated over three decades by the Italian Lega Nord (in this regard, see John Richardson and Monica Colombo, ‘Continuity and Change in Anti-Immigrant Discourse in Italy’, *Journal of Language and Politics*, 12.2 (2013), 180-202.

<sup>40</sup> Jessica Elgot and Matthew Taylor, ‘Calais crisis: Cameron condemned for ‘dehumanising’ description of migrants’, *Guardian*, 30 July 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>41</sup> Hanif Kureishi, ‘The migrant has no face, status or story’, *Guardian*, 30 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/30/hanif-kureishi-migrant-immigration-1> [accessed 10 September 2018].

The provocative comparison between migrants and zombies operated in the public sphere is examined by Camilla Fojas, who identifies it as a common trope in contemporary popular culture, especially in US TV series. See Camilla Fojas, *Zombies, Migrants and Queers: Race and Crisis Capitalism in Pop Culture* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017). See also Joseph Pugliese, ‘Crisis heterotopias and border zones of the dead’, *Continuum*, 23.5 (2009), 663-679.

<sup>42</sup> Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: ‘Race’, Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

even today marks the Western narrative of the relations between “white Europe” and its “others”.<sup>43</sup>

It is precisely this de-personalizing and de-humanising imaginary that is contested in *Terraferma* and *Éden à l'ouest*: in both films, the directors' choice is to insist on the grotesque nature of these portrayals by re-proposing and exposing them in the cinematic frame. As I have discussed, the insertion of an extradiegetic gaze in *Terraferma*'s narrative led to mixed consequences; however, Crialese's oneiric style is ideally located to discuss the nightmarish drift of the representation of migrants. In this sense, the most revealing example is the short sequence in which the young protagonist Filippo invites his friend Maura to take a sea trip at night. Stealing a boat from the harbour, the two arrive at open sea and start chatting. While they are swimming, a crowd of African migrants suddenly appears from the horizon to find rescue from the waters on the boat. The two are quickly surrounded by them, who hang on to the side of the boat, risking capsizing it. Still shaken by the confiscation of his grandfather's boat and by the fear of being persecuted for rescuing irregular migrants, in an outburst of rage Filippo starts hitting with an oar the hands of the exhausted migrants clinging to the edge. In repeated bursts, he violently disperses them, starts the engine and heads back to the harbour. Meanwhile, shocked Maura keeps protesting to the young man's action, stressing their duty to rescue the migrants from the sea (figure 4). This scene is followed by the events of the morning after, in which nearly-drowned migrants are brought to shore by the waves to the shocked sight of tourists.

This night sequence is not only essential as a catalyst for the story (from this moment on, in fact, the young guilt-ridden protagonist, resolves to follow the law of the sea rather than the state laws forbidding

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<sup>43</sup> See Grace Russo Bullaro (ed.), *From Terrone to Extracomunitario: New Manifestations of Racism in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (Leicester: Troubadour, 2010).



the rescue of illegal migrants from the waters), but also because it crucially reproduces the imaginary surrounding illegal migrations with the aim of causing a mocking, denunciatory effect. Indeed, this sequence only apparently complies with the alarmist image of irregular migrants by showing them as “dark” figures appearing from nowhere, fighting between life and death just like disturbing ‘undead’ subjects haunting the islanders’ routine arriving by sea as a threatening group of desperate individuals. Taking this representation to the extreme, Crialese transforms it into a surreal, grotesque scene acquiring the tones of a shocking nightmare by which, through the eyes of Maura, the spectator is invited to feel horrified at Filippo’s action of rejection. Such bodies are not ‘marvelous’, as Vetri Nathan has recently claimed, they are, on the contrary, horrendous both for the protagonists who are afflicted by moral conundrums, and for the EU audience used to the trope of a “migrant invasion” in mass media, of which this scene is a provoking materialization.<sup>44</sup> Insisting on the over-mediatized image of migrants deprived of speech, reduced to mere groups of bodies, the sense of distress conveyed to the spectator is no longer caused by the depiction of the migrants, but rather by making deliberately visible to the public the often-discussed fear of contamination or invasion.

Few scenes in recent European cinema appear as topical and as upsetting as this night sequence. As of 2018, the shipwrecks in Libyan and Italian waters still occur on a daily basis. In its crude visual power, in each banging blow cast on the hands of the exhausted migrants struggling to stay afloat, this scene tackles the crux of the debate on sea rescues and solidarity: namely lending cinematic time and shape to these images of horror, it shows the inhuman consequences of deciding not to act in support of migrants in distress.

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<sup>44</sup> Vetri Nathan, *Marvelous Bodies: Italy’s New Migrant Cinema* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2017).



**Figure 4. Filippo and Maura surrounded by a crowd of migrants fighting to stay afloat in the open sea at night (*Terraferma*).**

While in *Terraferma*'s plot the engagement with distorted portrayals of migrants remain confined to background extras, in *Éden à l'ouest* this aspect is addressed in the foreground of the narrative through the focus on the protagonist Elias. In fact, this film constitutes an original and courageous attempt to challenge the victimized portrayal of migrants found in mainstream representations by resorting to a satirical narrative style. Indeed, its French-naturalized Greek filmmaker Costa-Gavras,<sup>45</sup> who has found international recognition since the 1960s with socially committed, harrowing dramas such as *Z* (1969), *Missing* (1982) and *Amen* (2002), chose here to re-invent the migrant's story often read or seen in the news by adopting a surprisingly light-hearted tone in the film's narrative, which includes moments of entertainment and hilarity, but which, most importantly, performs a cutting satire directed at European institutions and society at large.

Like most European countries, France has witnessed the rise of nationalist and xenophobic movements and parties in the last few

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<sup>45</sup> Costa-Gavras has also participated in the 2015 'Appel des 800' for Calais refugees, in which directors, writers and intellectuals publicly mobilized to denounce the appalling state of human rights at the French border in Nord-Pas-de-Calais [http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/10/20/jungle-de-calais-l-appel-des-800\\_1407520](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/10/20/jungle-de-calais-l-appel-des-800_1407520) [accessed 10 September 2018].

decades.<sup>46</sup> In particular, the growing numbers of migrant arrivals, combined with insufficient measures of social services for the immigrant and refugee population, has propelled the popularity of Marine Le Pen's Front National, a populist and nationalist anti-European party whose main objective in the political manifesto was a zero-tolerance policy towards illegal migrants, especially of Muslim religion, repeatedly linking their presence to a threat to national security and to the risk of terrorism. Signs of hostility and increased securitization are also evident in state law, which punishes actions of assistance towards irregular migrants. More specifically, the *loi L622-1*, modified over the decades, establishes increasingly severe punishments for French citizens found helping undocumented individuals, with the declared aim of deterring solidarity with migrants.<sup>47</sup> Even if, since 2013, the law envisages attenuating circumstances for members of associations or for anyone providing basic assistance such as legal or medical, the number of French citizens condemned for the so-called '*délit de solidarité*' still increases each year.<sup>48</sup> For their part, associations for the protection of migrants' rights continue to criticize this legislation, which rather than functioning as a deterrent for the

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<sup>46</sup> With regard to this, see in particular the chapter 'Sarkozy's Law: National Identity and the Institutionalization of Xenophobia' in Dominic Thomas, *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration and Racism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 59-87.

<sup>47</sup> This law decrees: "Toute personne qui aura, par aide directe ou indirecte, facilité ou tenté de faciliter l'entrée, la circulation ou le séjour irréguliers, d'un étranger en France sera punie d'un emprisonnement de cinq ans et d'une amende de 30 000 euros", *Le Monde*, 'Immigration: pourquoi le «délit de solidarité» fait-il débat?', *Le Monde*, 6 January 2017,

[https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/01/06/immigration-ou-en-est-le-delit-de-solidarite\\_5058965\\_4355770.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/01/06/immigration-ou-en-est-le-delit-de-solidarite_5058965_4355770.html) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>48</sup> To this regard, see Liz Fekete, 'Europe: Crimes of Solidarity', *Race & Class*, 50.4 (2009), 83 – 97. For instance, the case of Cédric Herrou, a French citizen helping migrants and refugees cross the border between Italy and France in Ventimiglia has received considerable interest by the media in early 2017, becoming an emblematic example of how a law which should target smugglers has so far mainly been applied to individual citizens to discourage solidarity and activist actions (see Angelique Chrisafis, 'Farmer given suspended €3,000 fine for helping migrants enter France', *Guardian*, 10 February 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/10/cedric-herrou-farmer-given-suspended-3000-fine-for-helping-migrants-enter-france> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

*passeurs* appears to discourage forms of opposition by regular citizens to the dehumanising juridical limbo experienced by many unauthorised migrants.

The uncertainties and hardships of contemporary migration to Europe are skilfully rendered by Costa-Gavras in *Éden à l'ouest*. The film tells the story of Elias, a migrant travelling from an unspecified country – probably the Balkans or the Middle East – to France. During his illegal journey from one EU country to the other, he mostly experiences poverty, abuse and precariousness in all their forms, until he reaches Paris, his final destination, where he does not find the opportunities he hoped for.<sup>49</sup> Although Costa-Gavras's stylistic treatment of illegal migration through the figure of Elias remains one of the most subversive and original in the landscape of contemporary migration cinema to this day, *Éden à l'ouest* has mostly received lukewarm reviews by critics, particularly for the choice of Italian teen idol Riccardo Scamarcio as the lead role, which was considered as a miscasting given the seriousness and topicality of the political debate on unauthorised migration.<sup>50</sup> However, as I aim to illustrate, when analysed for its re-elaboration of the migrant's figure, the film fully reveals a deeply original treatment of the clandestine condition experienced by displaced individuals across Europe.

Although this film was conceived by Costa-Gavras as a parody of Ulysses's mythical journey, it is in fact productive to analyse it in the context of the picaresque genre, which typically presents a young, unprivileged protagonist experiencing a series of misadventures which expose him to a corrupt society.<sup>51</sup> Certainly the reference to Ulysses is made explicit at the beginning of the film, especially in the scene of Elias

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<sup>49</sup> For a detailed plot of *Éden à l'ouest*, see Appendix 2.

<sup>50</sup> See Deborah Young, 'Film Review: Eden Is West', *Hollywood Reporter*, 26 February 2009, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/film-review-eden-west-92933> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>51</sup> See for example Maya Jaggi, 'French Resistance: Costa Gavras', *Guardian*, 4 April 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/apr/04/costa-gavras> [accessed 10 September 2018].

waking up on an unknown shore which echoes the Greek hero regaining conscience on the Phaeacians coast. However, this fast-paced fable bears much more resemblance to works like Voltaire's *Candide*, not only for a narrative structure which follows the journey of the protagonist, and which in *Éden à l'ouest* is also closely connected to the genre of road movies, but also for its eerie light-heartedness which intermittently reveals a bitter critique of the contemporary capitalist system. Like *Candide*, Elias is a naïve character still learning the ways of the world, faced with different individuals who either assist him in his itinerary or exploit him in any possible manner. Indeed, Costa-Gavras's film appears to re-vitalize the satirical charge of the picaresque tradition to de-dramatize victimised depictions of migrants while also denouncing the many ways in which illegal migrants are exploited in late capitalist Europe. Throughout the film, Elias is constantly subjected to a system which reduces him, as the director underlined, to a 'corps étranger' without rights, at the mercy of the economic market and of other people's interests.<sup>52</sup>

Such a strikingly satirical grammar, which skilfully holds together naivety and lightness on one hand, and more tragic elements of critique on the other, is epitomised in the film by two scenes: the "man hunt" and the gag of the "toilet of death". In the first one, the police have just been informed of the presence of illegal migrants in proximity of the Eden tourist centre; the resort director, invited to cooperate in the search, decides to transform this "man hunt" into an entertainment activity for the resort guests. Both amused by this unusual task and glad to contribute as responsible citizens to European security, the tourists are briefed for the search: when they see an illegal migrant, they have to block him without harming him, and raise the alarm to the rest of the search party. Elias, who is trying to pass as an

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<sup>52</sup> AlloCiné, 'Interview to Costa-Gavras', 10 February 2009, [http://www.allocine.fr/video/player\\_gen\\_cmedia=18864694&cfilm=133334.html](http://www.allocine.fr/video/player_gen_cmedia=18864694&cfilm=133334.html) [accessed 10 September 2018].

employee of the centre, listens to the instructions, mixing among the crowd. In reply to a tourist's question: 'Qu'est-ce qu'on fait si on trouve un clandestin?', the manager turns to Elias and grabs him from behind by way of demonstration (figure 5). Although this gesture causes the hilarity of the tourists, who believe the handsome stranger is "one of them", the spectator is aware of Elias's illegal condition and strongly perceives his fear of being arrested and deported, in addition to his discomfort in receiving the manager's unwanted attentions. Indeed, in the following scene, the man traps the protagonist into a stock room and sexually assaults him. When an illegal migrant is finally arrested, the search is over and the guests are compensated with free drinks at the bar. Even if only experienced "by proxy" in the scene of demonstration, Elias embodies here the foreign body of the system, an undesirable presence to be expelled by the Club Eden which, with its ironic name, clearly stands for a fortified Europe whose sphere of purity, as often implied in political debates, must be preserved against the attacks of unknown and unwanted foreigners.



**Figure 5. Elias is purportedly “found out” by the manager who is demonstrating to the resort guests what to do in case they discover an illegal migrant (*Éden à l'ouest*).**

An even more explicit reference to the reduction of the migrant to an alien body is found in the scene of the “toilet of death”, in which the allusion to the migrant's body is reinforced by another feature

typical of the picaresque genre: the scatological motif. When Elias, shortly after in the film, is hired as assistant to the magician to hold a show at the resort, he is involved in a series of illusions and performances. One of the most deceiving tricks consists in plunging Elias into an open toilet and make him disappear inside, upside down (figure 6). Echoing a previous episode in the film, in which Elias is mistaken for a plumber by a resort customer and is forced to unclog a toilet with his bare hands, the reappearance of elements connected to dirt and bad hygiene (toilet paper, soiled water, WCs) provocatively refers to the derogatory treatment to which illegal migrants are often subjected. The fear of contamination, the association between migrants and dirt are indeed typical of the xenophobic anti-immigrant rhetoric of the last decades spread in most European countries. As Bauman has argued, undocumented individuals are literally regarded as 'human waste' by the globalized system:<sup>53</sup> since they fall outside citizenship rights, they are not only infinitely exploitable by society, but most importantly they are disposable like undesirable goods at any time, once they become "unwanted" or no longer useful. Not much different from the migrant corpses which, later in the film, are found lying on the shore and, as 'ungrievable lives', to quote Judith Butler,<sup>54</sup> must be hastily hidden from the view to avoid troubling people's holidays, Elias is forced, throughout the narrative, either as a farce or in reality, into the role of a body easy to exploit, harass, violate, precisely because the illegal status hinders him from protesting these abuses to the authorities. Thus, Costa-Gavras's insertion of such satirical moments creates powerful allegories of xenophobia and state violence, making extremely visible the fear of contamination which underlies them. It is indeed this sense of fatigue generated by the narrative device of accumulation, which portrays Elias as constantly chased, for one reason

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<sup>53</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives*.

<sup>54</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. xix.

or the other, by the system and by the individuals he runs into, to ultimately expose and ridicule the EU restrictive immigration laws to the spectator's gaze.



**Figure 6. The magician makes Elias disappear in the “toilet of death” trick, causing the amazement and hilarity of the audience (*Éden à l’ouest*).**

Together with the element of satire, Costa-Gavras’s characterization of Elias is the other crucial aspect distinguishing *Éden à l’ouest* from the many examples of migration cinema that have flourished in the last years. Such a lively and detailed characterization of the migrant is indeed absent, for example, in Crialese’s depiction of Sara, whose figure is constantly looked upon and filtered by the gaze of the Italian characters. Elias, vice versa, is represented in a constant struggle between two poles of attraction: on the one hand, a system which reduces him to mere labour, mute and nameless illegal presence; on the other, Elias’s own dream for a better future in Europe, which however soon reveals itself to be very distant from the idealised image of Eden, as ironically alluded in the film’s title.

Elias aptly symbolizes the condition of an inexperienced, young man who must face countless difficulties to realize his plan to reach Paris. Since he barely speaks other languages, he remains silent for most the film, except for single words or broken sentences in English or French. Without documents, without money, and ultimately without rights, he



struggles to interact with others and is often misunderstood or tricked by them. Trapped in the condition of exploitable foreign body from which he constantly tries to escape, his only resort seems however to consist in his own physicality: by means of his pleasant appearance, of gestures and facial expressions, Elias finally manages to get by in the journey and reach his destination. In this sense, his muteness not only is a clear homage to silent movies directors like Chaplin or Keaton, but also links the figure of the migrant to the anti-heroic protagonists typical of their films. Like Chaplin's character of the Tramp, like a figure of 'vagabond' for the global era, as Bauman has suggested, Elias is finally depicted as an idealist anti-hero, whose ingenuous aspirations and good-naturedness remain untouched by the hypocrisy and contradictions of Western society.

But it is the insertion of the theme of magic to decisively counterbalance Elias's reduction to mere body.<sup>55</sup> Since his meeting with the magician at the resort, illusions and trickery increasingly gain weight in the story, not only because the magician invites him to visit him in Paris and thus provides further motivation for Elias to continue his journey. In a truly magic-like fashion, the protagonist passes from one encounter to the other, from one camouflage to the next, like costumes of yet another illusionist performance: from the clerk uniform stolen at the resort, to the dazzling white turban of the show, to the torn jumper and the smart jacket donated by people on the way. More than a simple catalyst for the narrative development, magic becomes, throughout the film, a poignant emblem of hope and desire for change: truly magical appears the way in which, despite all obstacles, Elias manages to arrive in Paris. It is precisely the insistence on illusionism to generate a bittersweet effect, since it represents the migrant's desire

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<sup>55</sup> The same year another film presented a similar approach to the subject of migration: Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011). Marked by a linear plot and elementary dialogues typical of its Finnish director, this film is another example of a non-dramatic treatment of the theme of illegality and marginalization.

for a different reality, which cannot be found across Europe. As an old employee at the Lido claims, 'C'est un tel futoir dans le monde, seul un magicien peut changer tout ça'. Following the idealist ambitions of Elias, in fact, only accentuates a critical vision onto the unbearable crudeness of the reality he clashes with, marked by deceit and self-interest. When, at the end of the film, Elias is hardly recognized and quickly dismissed by the magician who had invited him in Paris, all his expectations of future collaborations dissolve, like a magic trick unveiled.

It is however in the second part of the film's finale that the resort to magic as a narrative device provides a new reading to Elias's entire story: in fact, the young man, crying with disappointment, is left with a cheap magic wand in his hands; when this starts sparking, he points it towards the Eiffel Tower, which suddenly lights up. Immediately, almost like a vision, a line-up of riot police appears to his side, inducing him to move forward (figure 7). In this open ending with the tones of magic realism, which could equally hint at an imminent arrest, at a future of struggle in Paris or at a positive development for Elias, the spectator leaves the protagonist walking towards the Eiffel Tower. Like an apprentice magician, Elias is now left alone to put in practice the experiences acquired and to face his own future.

What Costa-Gavras seems to suggest here is that, despite the tragic future awaiting Elias in Europe, his ambitions were legitimate. By offering a visionary materialization of them, this conclusion attributes them weight and dignity, no matter how idealised and unrealistic they may have been. Compared to the victimising and dramatized portrayals found in the media, *Éden à l'ouest* adopts a lighter register to show contemporary migrations to Europe, which provides them with revived strength by means of a satirical, yet also deeply poetical narrative. This poetization is not distant from the reality it depicts, because, precisely like magic realism, it remains deeply rooted in the context of contemporary events which inspired its filmmaker. Differently from the

aesthetic abstraction configured in *Terraferma*, which led the spectator away from the tragic nature of the events watched, it is paradoxically through the insertion of both satire and of magic that a distancing from the reality of migration events is constantly denied.



**Figure 7. In the final scene, Elias points his magic wand towards the Eiffel Tower, which suddenly lights up (*Éden à l'ouest*).**

Both Crialese and Costa-Gavras, as I have argued, make the representation of the irregular migrant a major concern in their two films. They present migrants in the situations in which xenophobic movements literally or symbolically put them: left to die at sea, metaphorically “flushed down” the toilet, repeatedly captured and expelled from the European territory. By making these scenes clearly visible to the spectator, both works target these stereotyped representations of the irregular migrant subject. Especially in the case of *Éden à l'ouest*, the use of satire represents an innovative strategy which makes this film one of the first examples to adopt a less dramatic register of representation, which however succeeds in expressing a bitter criticism of European immigration policies. While the extradiegetic gaze in *Terraferma* did not actually engage with the representation of the migrant itself, and can even be seen as a tendency to take a distance from it, in Costa-Gavras’s film the original characterization of Elias as a magician facing the challenges of the

illegal condition powerfully addresses the need for alternative models of representation as a sounding board for migrants' claims.

I will now analyse the film *Welcome*, the last example of cinematic re-elaboration of contemporary stories of migration in this chapter.

### 2.3 Performing Cinematic Encounters in Calais: *Welcome*

*Terraferma* and *Éden à l'ouest* are crucial examples of how, respectively, the camera gaze and the protagonist's characterization attempt to provide alternative representations of illegal migration to Europe. Lioret's priority in *Welcome*, instead, appears to be not so much the re-evaluation of the migrant figure, as the examination of the relationships between the main subjects involved in the migration crisis in Calais.

The story tells about the encounter between Bilal, a Kurdish teenager trying to reach London, and Simon, a swimming instructor living in Calais.<sup>56</sup> After a failed attempt to be smuggled in a lorry, Bilal stubbornly convinces himself that if he could swim across the Channel, the border police will not stop him. Therefore, although he cannot swim, he starts taking swimming lessons with Simon, who in the meantime tries to dissuade him from his plan. This will be the beginning of an important friendship between the two characters, resembling a father-son relationship. However, the relationship is brutally interrupted by Bilal's death during the sea crossing.

Reproducing the entwined points of view of Bilal and Simon, this film aims at representing an empathic meeting "across the barricades" of the new securitized Europe. Retrieving the theme of the hindered journey so frequent in migration cinema,<sup>57</sup> Lioret's film is a poignant

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<sup>56</sup> For a detailed plot, see Appendix 2.

<sup>57</sup> Recent studies have highlighted how French cinema has been impacted strongly by the American road movie genre, which typically presents the protagonist's journey

representation of the tragedy of contemporary illegal journeys which received the praise of critics and audiences. In fact, besides its positive reception at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival with fifteen minutes of applause, the same year it received the prestigious LUX prize by the European Parliament, which enabled its wide distribution in different European countries.

Lioret's treatment of this migration story appears much more realistic compared to the other two films analysed: in his work, there is no trace of satire or aesthetic virtuosity, but rather the aim to reproduce the reality of the inhabitants of Calais, both the official ones living in the town and the unofficial, displaced ones living in the "Jungle".<sup>58</sup> More precisely, Lioret's strategy is to adopt a realist style that explicitly avoids lingering on the inflated images of suffering individuals but constantly alludes to it throughout the film.<sup>59</sup> The gaze cast onto the events in

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across different geographical contexts corresponding to developments in the plot and changing psychological states in the character. As analysed by Gott and Shilt, however, in road movies the journey can acquire a more positive or negative qualification and convey a sense of liberation and change in the protagonist, or represent endurance, discomfort and suffering. Indeed, a great part of contemporary migration films present stories in which the journey symbolizes suffering and frustration, either because it is forced upon the character, as in the case of war refugees, or because he or she faces bureaucratic, legal or economic obstacles preventing the arrival in the desired destination. See Gott and Schilt (eds.), *Open Roads, Closed Borders* and Neil Archer, *The French Road Movie: Space, Mobility, Identity* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> While staying in Calais to develop the film's script, co-written with Emmanuel Courcol, Philippe Lioret collaborated with local associations and witnessed the daily struggles of migrants and refugees living in the area surrounding the harbour, named "la Jungle", from where they attempt to cross the Channel to reach the UK (Olivier De Bruyn, 'Philippe Lioret: "Calais est notre frontière mexicaine"', *L'Obs*, 10 March 2009, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-rue89-culture/20090310.RUE8973/philippe-lioret-calais-est-notre-frontiere-mexicaine.html> [accessed 10 September 2018]). From 1999 to 2002, the Sangatte reception centre, managed by the French Red Cross, was open to migrants transiting in Calais. Once the centre closed, a number of spontaneous camps proliferated in the area near the Eurotunnel and the harbour. These smaller settlements are periodically dismantled by local police but reappear soon after: the peak in camp population was reached in autumn 2015, when charities estimated that 6000 migrants and refugees lived in the Jungle. After this was bulldozed in February 2016, smaller camps have formed again in different parts of the area.

<sup>59</sup> Similar attempts to divert the spectator's gaze from images of nameless migrants in difficulty to more intimate and in-depth representations of the migrant's experience are Mahamat Saleh Haroun's *Une saison en France* (2017) and Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache's *Samba* (2014), which respectively adopt a dramatic and a comic

*Welcome* too, except for the final sequence, does not insist on dramatic sequences, nor does it obsessively portray the living conditions of the migrants near the harbour. In fact, the director chose to counter the focus of mass media on the shocking conditions of the Calais camps with the story of a more intimate, one-to-one dimension of encounter between the two protagonists.<sup>60</sup> It is through this cinematic grammar, realist and yet dramatically spelt out by an intense piano soundtrack, that *Welcome* articulates a parched, hard-hitting condemnation of the attitude of both the state and individuals towards immigrants and refugees, culminating with the death of the young protagonist at the end of the film.

As the title suggests, *Welcome*'s crux is indeed to reflect on the state of hospitality in Europe in the present historical circumstances. As Jacques Derrida claimed, hospitality towards the stranger and the foreigner is a central question in all societies, at all historical moments.<sup>61</sup> If the way foreigners are treated by institutions appears to reflect a society's values and priorities, then contemporary France reveals itself as a country of marginalization and diffidence towards the 'other', a country in which hospitality is increasingly selective, but also a state in which solidarity with migrants is actually assimilated by authorities to a criminal act to condemn. In fact, as Étienne Balibar has argued, this socio-political condition closely resembles a situation of apartheid, in which 'a statutory line of partition separating citizens and noncitizens' is drawn, and in which the illegal migrant, regardless of his or her personal story and motivations for trying to reach Europe, is regarded as the enemy and threat to national security.<sup>62</sup>

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approach to the story of an asylum seeker struggling to remain in France and the increasing involvement of a French woman assisting him in his endeavour.

<sup>60</sup> See Allociné, 'Interview à Philippe Lioret', 9 March 2009, <http://www.allocine.fr/personne/fichepersonne-17724/interviews/?cmedia=18872574> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>61</sup> Derrida and Dufourmatelle, *Of Hospitality*.

<sup>62</sup> Étienne Balibar, 'Europe, an "Unimagined" Frontier of Democracy' (transl. by Frank Collins), *Diacritics*, 33.3-4 (2003), 36-44 (p. 40).

It is precisely this atmosphere of social divisiveness which is addressed in Lioret's film: by following the social dynamics between Europeans and migrants in Calais, this work shows a representative microcosm of European society, in which values of hospitality and solidarity are increasingly abandoned in the name of national security and decorum, and in which indifference and hypocrisy appear to be the prevailing public attitudes towards undocumented migrants. All these attitudes are aptly represented in the different characters in the story: the volunteers in Calais who struggle to provide assistance to migrants and campaign for their rights' protection; the hostile or indifferent citizens who would like to ignore the migrants' presence; the policemen, ordered to arrest as many "clandestines" as possible to deter further arrivals. Such a sense of social conflict is also stylistically reproduced in the film by portraying Calais as a gloomy city in the winter, in which human actions are closely controlled by security forces – city police, border police, and security guards – with the effect that Bilal and the other migrants constantly inhabit a condition of 'deportability'.<sup>63</sup> This oppressive atmosphere is also made clear from Simon and Marion's first scene together, when they witness a security guard preventing the access of two migrants at the supermarket. After Marion protests in vain to defend the migrants, she asks her husband: 'Tu sais ce que ça veut dire quand on empêche les gens de rentrer dans les magasins? Tu veux que je t'achète un livre d'Histoire?'. Despite Simon's progressive involvement in Bilal's misadventures, the social disposition portrayed in the film is the palpable intolerance of Calais' population towards the residents of the "Jungle", who are chased, arrested, or alternatively ignored and marginalised by the authorities.

The prevailing attitude of hostility among the inhabitants of the microcosm of Calais is well epitomised by the figure of Simon's

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<sup>63</sup> Nicholas De Genova, 'Migrant Illegality and Deportability in Everyday Life', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31 (2002), 419-47.

neighbour. If the city also counts many associations campaigning for migrants' rights, *Welcome* crudely insists on the figure of the "zealous" citizen who actively operates to ensure immigration laws are applied. One of the most hard-hitting scenes in this sense is that of Simon's house search by the police. Alerted by the neighbour of the fact that Simon is hosting illegal migrants, the police arrives early in the morning in the hope of catching him red-handed. Once they cannot find anything irregular and they must leave, the agent assures Simon that the following time they will come even earlier. As Simon closes the door behind the policemen, his eye catches the writing on his neighbour's doormat on the landing: 'welcome' (figure 8). His gaze, reproduced in a subjective frame, lingers on it for a few seconds. This scene, which increasingly acquires a sense of bitter irony considering the unchanged and even worsening state of migrants' rights across Europe, aptly summarises a superficial openness towards the "other", which soon reveals itself as a "selective" invitation marked by a fear of contamination from foreigners. Ultimately, the neighbour's act of reporting Simon to the police follows the principle of "not in my backyard": indifference becomes open hostility when migrants enter his building, and when they are concretely helped by another French citizen who symbolically and materially opens his house to some of them. Focusing on these complex social interactions rather than on the individual characterization of the migrant figure, the story is thus a clear denunciation of the human costs generated by restrictive measures which propel hostility and division between the stranded individuals in northern France and the French residents, rather than encouraging dialogue and solidarity.





**Figure 8. The doormat “welcoming” the visitor in front of the door of Simon’s neighbour, who will denounce him to the police for hosting illegal migrants (*Welcome*).**

Against the backdrop of such a divisive context, the importance of a film like *Welcome* is precisely the staging of a human, and indeed humane, meeting between the protagonists Simon and Bilal. As Mireille Rosello has argued in *France and the Maghreb* (2005), cinema can play a crucial role in imagining alternative social realities by offering what she calls a ‘performative encounter’.<sup>64</sup> Closely linked to Bhabha’s notion of third space (that imaginary location which ‘enables other positions to emerge’<sup>65</sup>), Rosello’s concept refers to the possibility of devoting a creative space to stage a reconciliatory meeting between hostile factions, suggesting new modes of ‘cohabitation and coexistence’.<sup>66</sup> Although her reflection focused on the postcolonial relations between French and North Africa, and therefore referred to the existing dynamics between former colonizers and colonized, this notion can productively be extended to the often hostile relations between Europeans and non-European migrants in this historical moment. In fact, the meeting between Simon and Bilal, and the development of

<sup>64</sup> Mireille Rosello, *France and the Maghreb: Performative Encounters* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005).

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Rutherford, ‘The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha’, in Jonathan Rutherford, *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 207-221, (p. 211).

<sup>66</sup> Rosello, *France and the Maghreb*, p. 6.

their entwined stories do not represent mere narrative devices, but rather testifies to the necessity and the desire, perceived by Lioret and by part of European society, to make this symbolic encounter happen, if only by the imaginative power of cinematic fiction. At a time where such meetings are discouraged and even criminalised by state law, showing acts of solidarity with undocumented migrants through cinema sends a much-needed invitation to civil society to reconsider the consequences of present regulations and to mobilize for a change in migration policies.

At the same time, *Welcome*, too, is invested by the same problematic aspects affecting much of European migration cinema. The main criticism that the story of Simon and Bilal has received concerns the way in which the young migrant's story seems to become functional to Simon's personal redemption with respect to his own conscience and that of his wife. As Imed Labidi has pointed out, Simon's interest in the migrant's vicissitudes seems primarily dictated by the hope to reconquer his wife, who regards him as a self-centred individual. In this sense, the relationship between Simon and Bilal only reproduces power relations between Europe and foreign migrants, presenting their disparity of possibilities which 'gives migrants very little choice of action' and underlines their 'dependency on European benevolence'.<sup>67</sup> This position sees *Welcome* fundamentally as a symbolic act of conscience salving on the part of French society, redeemed through the figure of a benevolent and atoning "do-gooder" who keeps Bilal's destiny dear to his heart. Easily enough, as Isabel Santaolalla has observed for similar EU cinematic narratives,<sup>68</sup> the film can indeed be interpreted as the story of Simon's personal crisis, in which the encounter with Bilal mainly acts as a catalyst for the narration of the Frenchman's change of attitude.

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<sup>67</sup> Labidi, 'Welcome: An Insight into the Landscape of Contemporary French Consciousness'.

<sup>68</sup> Santaolalla, 'Body Matters', p. 169.

It is certainly true that this film reproduces the very hegemonic power dynamics that allow the existence of a migratory crisis in Calais: indeed, *Welcome* remains, in all respects, a European cultural product. Just like Lioret has the upper hand in creating the film narration, Simon is the one in a power position in relation to Bilal: he can host Bilal or decide not to, he can give him swimming lessons to help him cross the Channel or stop and ultimately, he can decide to care about or ignore the migrant's difficulties. Lioret's attempt to maintain a balance between the focalization on Bilal's story and Simon's story can also be questioned: is the European point of view inevitably privileged in the course of the film, making the young migrant's perspective secondary?

If these resurfacing questions are destined to remain unresolved, it appears necessary to underline the essential role that films like *Welcome* play in the current historical moment: albeit partial and inevitably revealing their European origins, these works configure themselves as an ideal ground not only to process and witness contemporary events, but also to imagine alternative social scenarios. *Welcome*, in particular, makes powerfully visible not only the hypocrisy of the zealous neighbour denouncing Simon and Bilal, but also a pacifying contact between the two sides of "Fortress Europe". A fundamental aspect in the film is in fact the strength with which the feelings of guilt and powerlessness of French and EU citizens are brought to the surface of the narrative, and how they actively question the role of Western citizens in the current migratory events.<sup>69</sup> When criminalization of migration but also of any form of help given to

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<sup>69</sup> A poignant reflection on the theme of powerlessness in the face of restrictive immigration laws is portrayed in the final sequence of Haroun's *Une saison en France* (2017). After her partner Abbas (Eric Ebouaney) is denied asylum in France, Carole (Sandrine Bonnaire) drives from Paris to Calais, hoping to find him there. Arrived at the site of the former "Jungle", she only finds the destroyed and deserted refugee camp. Caught by a sense of hopelessness, the defeated woman turns her gaze to the camera, realising that she will probably never see Abbas again. Carole's look of desperation seems to condense an accusation towards EU's immigration system, and to generate a sense of uncomfortableness in the audience about their passivity in the creation and consolidation of "Fortress Europe".

undocumented migrants by EU citizens contributes to discourage movements of solidarity with them, performing reconciliatory encounters on the screen reveals that cinema seems to play a crucial role in fostering and circulating more human and intimate views of migration stories, in opposition to the spectacularized forms of migrants' visibility available in mass media reports.

#### **2.4 What Is to Be Shown? European Migration Films as Transitional Representations**

As I have attempted to show in this chapter, cinema can contribute in an extremely relevant way to the debate on the representation of migration stories. Due to its visual nature, it appears to be a privileged field of analysis to reconsider and return to “us – European spectators” the gaze which is relentlessly cast onto the struggle of migrants at the EU borders, and to challenge pre-established patterns of portrayals through images.

In *Against the Double Blackmail*, Žižek asks, regarding the current EU migration crisis: ‘What is to be done?’<sup>70</sup> On a similar note, another question should be formulated: what is to be shown? With regard to contemporary European cinema, what should be the focus adopted by EU migration films? All directly engaging with the widespread representation fatigue affecting illegal migration, the filmmakers analysed in the previous pages have decided to re-interpret the stories seen in the media by means of different strategies. As I have attempted to show, Crialese’s adoption of an external gaze generated both an aesthetic exploration of the environment where the story develops, focusing in particular on the element of the sea, and a sense of distance from the events represented, in line with his aim to

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<sup>70</sup> Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail*, p. 97.

‘transcend’ the immediate contingencies and transform them into a wider reflection on human movement. This ambiguous stance between engagement and disengagement with the witnessing of migrant deaths through the cinematic language still raises doubts about the nature of films like *Terraferma*, which re-elaborate, perhaps excessively, the reality they aim to represent through the established film poetics of their authors, and by doing so risk cornering the migrant’s story to the periphery of the narrative.

More convincing results are obtained when Crialese engages with the portrayal of migrants as “zombies” in the film: exposed in its extremeness, the reduction of displaced people to “undead” dark figures threatening European stability is powerfully rendered in *Terraferma*’s night sequence through a nightmarish atmosphere that denounces the language and images used by anti-immigration movements. A similar expedient is also prominent in *Éden à l’ouest*, which constitutes a particularly successful example of political satire directed at EU immigration policies. Through the homage to the picaresque genre and the adoption of magic as a redemptive strategy for Elias, Costa-Gavras offers a deeply innovative rendition of the challenging experiences of today’s illegal migrants, which acutely condemns the security obsession of the EU border system and the marginalization and exploitation of undocumented individuals.

The narrative strategy used by Lioret in *Welcome* is aimed, by contrast, at a more traditional and realistic depiction of migration events in the city of Calais. The film’s distinctive feature for the purpose of this discussion is, in fact, not its style but its plot, which revolves around the meeting between the two protagonists. As I have illustrated, reading the story in the light of Rosello’s notion of ‘performative encounter’ reinforces the view that, against the backdrop of restricted immigration and citizenship policies, cinema remains a space for staging reconciliatory social relationships between Europe’s regular and irregular inhabitants. It is by showing such an encounter that, at least

in the fictional sphere, the prevailing dynamics of exclusion and stigmatization of migrant subjects appear to be altered by means of a story of friendship and solidarity on mutual terms.

Nonetheless, a central problem that this chapter has addressed is the fact that, while these films attempt to re-evaluate the figure of the undocumented migrant, they also embody complex contradictions intrinsic in the very choice of addressing the “other’s” story. The prevalence of these external, EU perspectives demonstrate how the cinematic industry is largely inaccessible and inhospitable to migrant voices, which remain confined to dedicated prizes, and projects, but cannot establish themselves as emerging voices in a cultural field that tends to invest on established EU voices. As I have discussed, the major challenge of European migration cinema is precisely its European authorship, which inevitably risks reproducing a hegemonic positionality in these filmic representations. Indeed, when the gaze cast on these events belongs to an Italian or French director, the ever-present risk is not only the transformation of these tragic events into cathartic experiences for the European audience, but also the creation of implicit, if not voluntary, subtexts about the European’s character’s benevolent heroicism in assisting the irregular migrant. Most importantly, the challenge seems to be to resist the temptation to transform migration cinema, too, into yet another spectacle of suffering which merely reproduces the inflated images of displaced individuals already found in the mass media. As for the case of *Terraferma*, transcending these events into the aesthetic realm of cinema means that the burning urgency that such a representation should convey is somehow put on hold to prioritize matters of aesthetic research. All these complex issues definitely constitute, as Guido Rings has suggested, ‘the largest obstacles’ which could undermine the possibility for these films of having a meaningful impact on today’s public debates

on Europe's borders and citizenship.<sup>71</sup> As long as the majority of the cultural products available to the Italian or French audience is still crafted by European directors, rather than by migrants themselves, the representation patterns of benevolence and hegemonic appropriation of the other's narrative will be lurking in those cinematic works addressing the current "migration crisis".

Finally, an equally critical element to consider when reflecting on the achievements of these migration films is the difficulty of measuring their impact on the European audience. The three films analysed in this chapter are certainly not examples of avant-garde cinema: much as they present original re-interpretations of migration stories, their directors' aim was to involve as many spectators as possible in an accessible reflection on the current European events. Although *Terraferma*, *Éden à l'ouest* and *Welcome* were distributed in Italy, France and a few other European countries receiving a positive response in terms of box-office and critique, they often remained confined to restricted cinematic circuits such as themed festivals and independent theatres, thus being mostly seen by selected members of the public who were already sensitised to migration issues. Thus, can they be considered as successful contributions to the public debate if their message remained predominantly confined to those selective distributions failing to reach the more general public? This paradox, often referred to as "preaching to the converted" is indeed typical of artworks and events dedicated to specific social issues, which are often unable to appeal to potential spectators who are not already interested in those same issues. Such a sense of distance from the wider population is a fundamental crux that inevitably relativises these films' success and, similar to the cases of migration festivals and museums which will be considered in the following chapters, invites us to reflect on the

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<sup>71</sup> Guido Rings, *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema*, p. 2.

complexities of spectatorship, impact and reception as much as on those connected to authorship.

Yet, is the cinematic corpus authored by EU directors to be mostly disregarded on the basis of these ambiguous aspects? Is the stress on the shocked face of Maura abandoning migrants in the open sea in *Terraferma*, or Simon's suffering at his powerlessness faced with Bilal's death, merely to be read as an emotional element which steals the scene from the migrant's story, similar to Ai Weiwei's photos re-enacting the death of Alan Kurdi? To what extent does the fact that such films are mainly watched by people already sensitized, or "converted", to their message of solidarity with migrants compromise their aim to alter public attitudes in Europe? On the other hand, thinking about the essential testimony played by committed art in respect to its contemporary society, how could maintaining silence on the part of European directors be more ethical? Much as these films are problematic, they nonetheless appear to play a crucial role in offering alternative visions of the protagonists of illegal journeys, at a historical moment when the voices of migrants' struggle to be heard in the public sphere. Indeed, these films can be regarded as transitional representations of migration to Europe, in anticipation of more direct interventions on the part of directors from a migratory background.

Ultimately, while some may risk confining the migrant character to a "corner" of the film narrative, the films discussed still reflect the commitment to develop probing approaches to the visual representation of the undocumented individuals travelling to Europe, and, if nothing else, this certainly encourages audiences to re-consider the ethical implications of European spectatorship in the current migratory events.





**Part II**  
**Exhibiting and Performing Communities**



### 3. Curating Contemporary Migration: Politics of Representation at the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration and at the Memoria E Migrazioni Gallery

'The forgotten do not complete the picture; rather, they query the frame, the pattern, the construction and advance what the previous representation failed to register'. (Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*, 2008, p. 59).

'I want an institution – whether university, museum, gallery or whatever – that doesn't reproduce white supremacy, that doesn't represent a prison, in which there isn't expropriated labor, there isn't extinction, and there isn't genocide. What would that look like?'. (Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Empty the Museum, Decolonize the Curriculum, Open Theory', 2017, p. 21).

In the two previous chapters, I have analysed the role played by literary fiction and films in addressing established depictions of migratory journeys and in creatively re-imagining them through written text or visual image. However, text and image are also essential elements of the museum, which uniquely combines them within a site-specific architecture to convey a certain vision of society to its visitors. In this chapter, I will focus on migration museums arguing that they are fundamental case studies for understanding how representations of migration are constructed in the public sphere and crucially intertwined with notions of community and identity.

The objects of my analysis here are the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (MNH) in the Palais de la Porte Dorée in Paris and the gallery Memoria E Migrazioni (MEM) at Museo Galata del Mare in Genoa. Respectively inaugurated in 2007 and 2011, the two institutions are part of a trend which has seen the number of migration museums in the world grow exponentially in the last twenty years. While in the USA or Australia migration museums have originated earlier in the public arena,<sup>1</sup> in most European countries galleries and

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most famous examples are New York's Ellis Island Museum, opened in 1990 and Adelaide's Migration Museum, established in 1986.

museums focusing on immigration and emigration only opened in the early 2000s. Indeed, the increasingly widespread phenomena of xenophobia and marginalization of migrant communities across Europe urgently called for the creation of new spaces in which mobility and integration could be discussed more positively with the aid of facts and figures debunking common stereotypes of migration.<sup>2</sup> Many national or regional museums were instituted to discuss immigration, emigration or both: notable examples are the BallinStadt in Germany (Hamburg), the Immigrantmuseet in Denmark (Farum), the Immigration Museum in Spain (Barcelona), the Fondazione Paolo Cresci in Italy (Lucca), the newly founded Migration Museum Project in London.<sup>3</sup> Most European governments have thus strategically invested in creating institutions which are intended to provide an official narrative of migration that ideally helps addressing social conflicts and promotes a dialogue between different communities living on the state territory. For this reason, looking at how migration museums are founded and curated can illuminate the co-presence of different agendas put in place by the state, by curators, artists and experts within the same institution, and identifies the museum as a fundamental space of political negotiation between dominant narratives and more independent voices of society. Focusing on significant elements in the MNHI and MEM (visual and textual material included in temporary and permanent exhibitions, in addition to the spatial arrangements within their buildings) and drawing on innovative tendencies in the field of museum studies, I will show how these sites host a web of conflicting discourses generated by

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<sup>2</sup> See Anna Chiara Cimoli, 'Migration Museums in Europe' in *European Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Setting the Framework* (vol. 2), ed. by Luca Basso Peressut, Francesca Lanz and Gennaro Postiglione (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2013), pp.313-30.

<sup>3</sup> Cimoli, 'Migration Museums in Europe', p. 313. For the London museum, see <http://migrationmuseum.org/> [accessed 10 September 2018]. A small-scale, independent example of migration museum is 19, Pincelet Street in Spitalfields, a preserved 18<sup>th</sup> century building which functioned as home and refuge for French Huguenots, a workshop for traders, and later as a synagogue. This space is now being transformed into a permanent exhibition on migration (see 19, Princelet Street, <https://www.19princeletstreet.org.uk/> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

the convergence of institutional rhetoric, politics of dissent and solidarity in the same space. In the effort to disentangle their intricate representation of identity and difference, I will then discuss the limits and the resources of the two case studies in carrying forward the current European public debate on transnational migration.

### **3.1 Migration Museums and the Politics of Identity and Difference**

That museums are intrinsically political institutions should come as no surprise.<sup>4</sup> As museum theorist Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has suggested, museums can be regarded as veritable political statements by which governmental authorities deploy ‘the power to name, to represent common sense, to create official versions’.<sup>5</sup> Nationally funded museums, in particular, which represent the majority on a global level, play a pivotal role in propagating specific political agendas in the public sphere by means of an institutional rhetoric addressed to their citizens and visitors.<sup>6</sup> Because of their strong connection to governments, museum narratives can hardly be neutral, and more often than not they clearly defend a precise political position which reinforces established, and often times conservative notions of community and national values. In fact, over the last three centuries museums have been functioning as sites of ‘soft power’, to use Joseph Nye’s expression, as indirect forms of cultural persuasion on the visitor and on the citizen exerted by state authorities through the institution’s building and collections.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Clive Gray, *The Politics of Museums* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Clive Gray, *The Politics of Museums*.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). Museums also remain primary *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, to refer to the imposing work edited by French historian Pierre Nora, and as such their message always has tight political implications. See Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984 and 1992).

The first public museums were born at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to educate visitors through the display of artefacts and exemplary objects from around the world. Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, museums became direct representations of national ideals and sites for the shaping of a national cultural identity. Not only did museums function as an illustration and justification of geographical expansion, colonialism and slavery, but some of them directly derived their collections from those same world fairs of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which decisively helped to propagate the idea of a savage, underdeveloped colonial “elsewhere” that Western powers had the duty to rule over.<sup>8</sup> Such educational but also authoritative conception of museums remained constant in their evolution throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even when national institutions felt the need to disavow their previous imperialistic positions, the role of museums as conservative public places of knowledge and memory remained unchanged until the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> In those years, however, New Museology urged for a renewal of museums institutions to adapt them to a postmodern, postcolonial time.<sup>10</sup> This innovative conceptualization aimed at transforming outdated temples of monolithic knowledge into public places able to host conflicting views and plurality, but also to interact with the visitor. In fact, one of the major contributions to New Museology came from reception studies, which invited curators and scholars to move the focus from the object of study (the museum and its collection), to its addressee (the visitor). This new approach was

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<sup>8</sup> ‘See Robert W. Rydell, ‘World Fairs and Museums’, in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. by Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 135-51.

<sup>9</sup> Education remains indeed a fundamental aspect which defines the very essence of museums. The International Council of Museums (ICOM), an international point of reference for cultural institutions across the world, states that ‘a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment’ (ICOM, ‘Museum definition’, <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Vergo (ed.), *New Museology* (London: Reaktion, 1989).

fundamental in the transformation of museums from a more traditional to a more interactive conception, in which the public is invited to actively contribute to the making of knowledge by sharing their personal experiences.

At the same time, since the 1980s postcolonial theory has challenged scholars and curators to rethink the ways in which museums can portray a relationship to otherness different from the simplified formula that distinguishes the Self from the Other.<sup>11</sup> Ethnographic and former colonial museums were in fact the starting point of a radical adjustment aimed at exposing the racial mentality that underpinned them and justified colonial expansion.<sup>12</sup> Such reflection on the postcolonial museum, however, can indeed be extended to other types of museums, because it concerns not only the revisiting of explicitly colonial collections, but more generally the intention of creating new approaches to narrative, memory and community in the museum space.<sup>13</sup> Still today, the crucial challenge for curatorial teams remains

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<sup>11</sup> See Dominic Thomas (ed.), *Museums in Postcolonial Europe* (London: Routledge, 2010) and Iain Chambers and others (eds.), *The Postcolonial Museum: The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). The MeLa Project: European Museums in an Age of Migrations (2011-2015), funded within the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme of the European Commission, investigated the major issues concerning the narration of migration in museum exhibitions (<http://www.mela-project.polimi.it/> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

<sup>12</sup> Postcolonial museology has underlined the necessity to rework the past in public museums, with particular reference to the fact that they included objects and artefacts looted from other populations, such as in the case of the Benin Bronzes appropriated by the British during a military expedition in 1897 and still held at the British Museum. The heated debate on the repatriation of objects subtracted to other cultures, ignited by new and postcolonial museology, is also part of a wider re-dimensioning of the importance of collections in museums, which has also seen the evolution of these institutions in experiments such as the “museum without objects”, in which the attention is not much on the artefacts preserved but on the information panels and activities offered to the visitor. To this regard, see the following footnote.

<sup>13</sup> A most interesting experiment in this direction was the ‘museum without objects’, recently advanced by Françoise Vergès for the Maison des Civilisations et de l’Unité Réunionnaise (MCUR). The project was launched in 2000 by the local council of the Reunion Island but closed only ten years later due to the interruption of funding by the newly elected conservative government. This museum about past and present of the island and its diverse communities was conceived not around a permanent collection, which was absent on the island, but around everyday objects that can initiate a cultural debate without the traditional need for caption and panels with a pre-existing narrative. In Vergès’s words, ‘we (the curators) would not seek to fill up a void, to compensate for the absence (of objects), we would work from the absence,



that of transforming traditionally static and authoritarian museums as material and symbolic archives<sup>14</sup> into more dialogic and open spaces, in which not one but many voices can be heard, achieving what has been called a 'polyvocal' dimension.<sup>15</sup> Such a co-presence of voices would re-dimension the main "voice" of the institution and invite experts, diverse members of society and the public to contribute to a plural narrative, one that can start transforming museums into 'contact zones', as James Clifford observed, into symbolic spaces mediating through social conflict and contributing to the building of more ethical and inclusive narrations.<sup>16</sup> A similar intervention is called for by visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, when he contests the persisting 'whiteness of the museum', that insufficient disavowal and re-contextualization of colonial past, and indeed neo-colonial present, which can still be perceived in museums as public institutions.<sup>17</sup>

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embracing it fully, for we understood that this absence was paradoxically affirming a presence. To us, the accumulation of objects destined to celebrate the wealth of a nation belonged to an economy of predation, looting defeated peoples or exploiting the riches of others' (See her contribution 'A Museum without Objects' in Chambers and others (eds.), *The Postcolonial Museum*, pp. 25-38, (p. 26)). Closely linked to the idea of *museo diffuso* (diffused museum) increasingly popular in Europe, this innovative take on exhibiting material culture privileges non-historicising approaches to museum practices, in particular with the attention for present culture, orality, and the attempt to include different stakeholders of the cultural meaning-making: citizens, visitors, local and national authorities, experts and curators.

<sup>14</sup> The notion of archive is extremely fertile when put in dialogue with the debate on postcolonial museums. Should museums continue to function as archives, as material and symbolic repositories for future generations, or should the very idea of the archive, so controversial and hegemonic in itself, be contested and overcome? See Iain Chambers, Giulia Grechi and Mark Nash (eds.), *The Ruined Archive* (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Rihannon Mason, Christopher Whitehead and Helen Graham, 'One Voice to Many Voices? Displaying Polyvocality in an Art Gallery', in *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, ed. by Viv Golding and Wayne Modest (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 163-77.

<sup>16</sup> James Clifford applied the idea contact zones to museums, retrieving Mary Louise Pratt's concept, in his seminal *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Empty the Museum, Decolonize the Curriculum, Open Theory', p. 14-16. Mirzoeff has contributed to the growing academic movement 'All Monuments Must Fall' concerning the dismantling of public monuments echoing or explicitly paying tribute to historical characters linked to white supremacy, apartheid and racism in the south of United States. A syllabus was drafted among different university departments, which summarises the crucial points about the de-construction and re-contextualization of colonial and racist past, all poignantly relevant to the debate on

Alongside polyvocality as an indispensable keyword to transform museums into postcolonial institutions, Chantal Mouffe's reflections on the nature of the public space can help us investigate and question the power dynamics contained in museums. In her work, the Belgian theorist has focused on different ways of reading political interaction and conflict in society, distinguishing between an 'antagonistic' and an 'agonistic' model.<sup>18</sup> While the former can be defined as a 'we/them' relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground', the latter conceives this relation as one in which neither of the opposing sides of a political relation prevail, since the conflict is irresolvable and the other side's contention is acknowledged as legitimate.<sup>19</sup> Mouffe maintains that reading political conflict as 'agonistic' rather than 'antagonistic' helps us go beyond a simplistic interpretation of the different positions circulating in the public sphere, and most importantly it invites us to focus on deciphering the co-existence of these conflicting views, rather than attempting to find a solution to this conflict.

When referred to the field of museum studies, thinking of the institution of museum as an agonistic space challenges the traditional reading of these spaces as monolithic narratives of power, but also encourages to move beyond interpreting them as inevitably strictly hegemonic sites. Indeed, as I will attempt to show, while numerous institutional narratives contained in museums remain anchored to a hegemonic, authoritative voice deriving from their state sponsorship, the real challenge remains how to open up these sites not to new

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the representation of migration and of the 'Other' in museums. See <https://archive.nyu.edu/handle/2451/40071> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>18</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political (Thinking in Action)* (London: Routledge, 2005); Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013); Chantal Mouffe, 'Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?', Cork Caucus, 2005, [https://readingpublicimage.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/chantal\\_mouffe\\_cork\\_caucus.pdf](https://readingpublicimage.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/chantal_mouffe_cork_caucus.pdf) [accessed 10 September 2018]. On the relevance of agonistic thinking for memorialization of the past in museums, see Anna Cento Bull, Hans Lauge Hansen, 'On Agonistic Memory', *Memory Studies*, 9.4 (2016), 390–404.

<sup>19</sup> Mouffe, 'Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?', p. 157.

hegemonic voices, but rather to a plurality of voices, which agonistically reproduce the multiplicity of the voices present in the public sphere.

The debate on whether museums can change to adjust to a different historical moment, or whether still today they remain rooted in their conservative role of ‘temples’ of knowledge is open.<sup>20</sup> Despite the general responsiveness with which curators across Europe have taken up the challenge of updating their institutions, contemporary museums continue to reproduce a profound tension between their traditional function in society and the attempt to decolonize and deconstruct their narratives,<sup>21</sup> particularly when it comes to museums dedicated to extremely politicised and debated topics like contemporary African migration to Europe. For this reason, institutional migration museums are the ideal locations to investigate in order to understand how states and regional authorities represent transnational movement for their citizens. Since migration calls into question notions of difference, citizenship and human rights which are fundamental for making sense of national identity, the museum as a place that aspires to become ‘polyvocal’ seems the best suited arena for hosting a much-needed reflection on the politics of representation of migration today. As a growing number of studies have observed, the relationship between migration and museums is particularly fertile because of those very dynamics of representation, sponsorship and political interests at stake in the cultural production of such public spaces.<sup>22</sup> Being typically state funded, migration museums can indeed

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<sup>20</sup> Janet Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Marstine, *New Museum Theory*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> See Christopher Whitehead and others (eds.), *Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe: Peoples, Places and Identities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Laurence Gouriévidis (ed.), *Museums and Migration: History, Memory and Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Christopher Whitehead, Susannah Eckersley and Rihannon Mason, *Placing Migration in European Museums: Theoretical, Contextual and Methodological Foundations* (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2012) and Amy K. Levin (ed.), *Global Mobilities: Refugees, Exiles, and Immigrants in Museums and Archives* (London: Routledge, 2017).

be read as rhetorical texts written and displayed by the state to promote its core social and cultural values for the community.

The political aim of most migration museums is clearly to positivize contemporary migration, to provide a constructive and open attitude towards migrant communities. However, discussing migration inevitably entails the creation of a narrative about national history. Indeed, transnational migration within the museum space is constantly inserted within a state discourse on the founding values of the nation, which functions as a rhetorical device to reflect on the concepts of community, difference and identity. Both the MNHI and the MEM, respectively sponsored by the French government and Genoa's local administration, manifestly put the stories of contemporary mobility to Europe in relation to, respectively, the notions of *francité* (Frenchness) and *italianità* (Italianness). However, as Achille Mbembe has observed, French national identity remains still today deeply rooted in the revolutionary values of 1789 and in the controversial concept of universalism, which directly derives from the Declaration of the Man and Citizen of 1793.<sup>23</sup> As I will show, it is this idea of Frenchness as a fixed, unchanging essence throughout the centuries to represent the ambiguous narrative thread at MNHI, as in which the story of immigration to France seems to represent another chance to reinforce republican values and promote national pride.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, at MEM the recent history of immigration to Italy is explicitly compared to the Italian diaspora in the world, and mobility is firstly approached to reflect on how it contributed, from Italy's late unification, to the very construction of Italian identity.

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<sup>23</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> In regard to this, see for example the controversial volume by Max Gallo, *L'Âme de la France: une histoire de la nation, des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), in which the history of France from Prehistory to present day traces the evolution of a deeply essentialist and patriotic notion of Frenchness as an epic, immutable "spirit" of the nation.

When institutional museums discuss contemporary migration via the concept of identity, essential questions about the changing, or persisting ideas of national values to multicultural societies and to a more open notion of community must be raised. In fact, including contemporary migrations in a museum display is a politically charged operation which does not necessarily entail a re-thinking of national identity by state institutions. Migration museums can succeed or fail, to different degrees, in making national identity relevant, or even politically correct, to the needs of contemporary society, by excluding immigrant populations from community narrations and by making national rhetoric and pride the museum's protagonists. As Michel Foucault famously argued, looking at what is excluded from official narrations can help us investigate specific political agendas and understand the ideology defended by hegemonic powers.<sup>25</sup> However, the indirect power of the museum's institutional discourse is articulated not only by means of exclusion, that is by marginalizing certain voices from the cultural debate, but also by privileging and defending one narrative of history and society over others. In fact, both the stories and voices included and excluded from the museum narrative can impact negatively on the general message of the institution and result partial, unethical, outdated.<sup>26</sup>

Because migration studies join museum studies in the common effort of rendering the paradigms of representation more plural and ethical, the two fields appear mutually fruitful areas of enquiry. Bearing in mind the recent developments of New and postcolonial museology, I will now analyse how the MNHI and MEM as institutional presences in the public sphere interact with their national political context. How are contemporary migrations from Africa to Europe framed in these

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

<sup>26</sup> As Cimoli has stressed, a migration museum can also separate the story of yesterday's emigrants from that of today's immigrants' and 'pretend to tell an "objective" story based on documents, letters, passports and numbers', Cimoli, 'Migration Museums in Europe', p. 322.

museums' narratives? Are these museums sufficiently equipped to turn into plural, inclusive spaces for a dialogue on identity, mobility and racism or are they mostly reproducing the hegemonic values of their sponsors? Can the visitor hear the non-European migrant's voice within the museum or does the national, institutional discourse prevail? At a historical juncture when political choices made by state powers and Europe point towards a reinforcement of external borders, and in which xenophobic movements are on the rise, it is more than ever essential to ensure that the debates within them are conducted as ethically and pluralistically as possible.

### **3.2 Thorny Premises: Framing the MNHI and MEM in Colonial Discourses**

The first problematic aspect of many contemporary museums is their very location, and indeed “framing” within previous institutions and their discourses, and the controversial connections and interactions generated by such insertion. Differently from the case of novels and films considered in the previous chapters, the first striking feature when analysing migration museums is not much how migration itself is represented, but rather how it is framed within the museum space by pre-existing institutional narratives. In fact, as architectonic spaces, newly opened museums tend to create a dialogue with their surrounding context, which is often an already established building created for a different purpose. Such insertion is obviously mainly dictated by the need and wish of local administrations to invest in existing buildings rather than creating new ones for a new-born museum. However, if this choice is a common and sensible practice to cut opening costs and at the same time re-evaluating public buildings, this spatial contiguity appears deeply problematic because it suggests a conceptual continuum between the original building and the newly-

added collection. This appears to be the case for the MNHI and MEM. Both migration museums, in fact, are additions to pre-dating collections (respectively, a museum on the French colonial empire and on Genoa's maritime power) which are closely linked to the idea of hegemonic domination over distant "others". Comparing the two institutions, it becomes evident that the discourse on migration is symbolically superseded by century-old discourses of national power, thus becoming much revealing of the difficulties and the limits encountered both in Italy and France in including the topic of immigration in their public narrations.

The project of the MNHI, originated in the 1990s, was only effectively announced under the Chirac government in 2002. Its aim was to create a public institution to celebrate the contribution of immigrants to French society from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary times, in order to counter the alarming marginalization of first and second-generation migrants, and to respond to the increasing success of right-wing political movements, in particular the Front National.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the same year the museum opened, Sarkozy's government instituted the Ministry of Immigration, Integration and National Identity, whose aims seemed to go against the very project of MNHI of celebrating diversity and promoting a positive image of migration. The conservative orientation of the ministry was so contested in the media and by the government opposition (but also by some members of the MNHI, who left the museum project in protest) that it was suppressed in 2010.<sup>28</sup> In addition, a couple of years earlier, the National Assembly

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<sup>27</sup> The museum's mission was the following: 'faire connaître l'apport des immigrés, souvent ignoré, à la construction et à l'histoire de la France' but also to account for 'le reflet qu'en donnant au quotidien les médias, notamment la télévision, puissants constructeurs d'images' (<http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/missions/le-projet-scientifique-et-culturel/historique-du-musee-national-de-l-histoire-de-l> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

<sup>28</sup> See the interviews to historians Gerard Noiriel and Patrick Weil in two articles: *L'Observateur*, 'Identité nationale: 8 universitaires démissionnent', *L'Observateur*, 19 May 2007,

approved the so-called 'law on colonialism' (*la loi du 23 Février 2005*), whose fourth article instituted the obligation to teach the positive impact of French domination on its colonies in secondary schools, thus attracting legitimate accusations of historical revisionism.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the opening of the museum in Paris was seen as a much-awaited chance to create a convincing and conciliatory narrative for a divided country, but also as a stage to condemn racism and depict a more positive portrayal of past and present immigration to France.

However, such high expectations were not met by the migration museum at its opening. As observed by numerous experts, the project seemed to represent a missed opportunity to initiate a public debate on French colonialism, for its scarce intention to challenge pre-established notions of French identity.<sup>30</sup> A major problematic aspect was indeed its location. In fact, to host the museum the Palais de la Porte Dorée was chosen, an imposing neo-classical building designed by architect Albert Laprade for the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1931. With its extended façade decorated with exoticized bas-reliefs portraying the colonies' nature and native peoples, this museum soon became a highly contested attempt to re-use a colonial space for a modern museum on the history of immigration. Indeed, the building presented direct connection to France's colonial past: in addition to its original role of

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<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/elections-2007/20070518.OBS7750/identite-nationale-8-universitaires-demissionnent.html> [accessed 10 September 2018]

and Camille Didelon, 'Immigration et identité nationale: une "confusion" et une "regression"', *Libération*, 18 May 2007,

[http://www.liberation.fr/france/2007/05/18/immigration-et-identite-nationale-une-confusion-et-une-regression\\_9694](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2007/05/18/immigration-et-identite-nationale-une-confusion-et-une-regression_9694) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>29</sup> See Claude Liauzu, 'At war with France's past', *Monde Diplomatique*, June 2005, <http://mondediplo.com/2005/06/19colonisation> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>30</sup> Mary Stevens, 'Still the Family Secret? The Representation of Colonialism in the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration' in Thomas (ed.), *Museums in Postcolonial Europe*, p. 115-25; Mary Stevens, 'Re-membering the Nation: the Project for the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2008); Maryse Fauvel, *Exposer l'"autre": Essai sur la Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration et le Musée du quai Branly* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014); Dominic Thomas, 'Object/Subject Migration: the National Centre for the History of Immigration' in Dominic Thomas, *Africa and France* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 42-57.



celebrating French Empire, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it hosted a number of collections: first the Musée Permanent des Colonies (1932), then the Musée de la France d’Outre-mer (1935) and the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens (1960), all of which distinguished themselves for a clearly Eurocentric and orientalisng curatorship. Nonetheless, through these metamorphoses and to this day, the Palais preserved its original layout and relatively minor refurbishments were operated to prepare the building to host the MNHI.

The immigration museum itself, located on the first and second floors, is composed of different parts which were progressively added from 2007 to 2012.<sup>31</sup> The permanent exhibition (*Repères*) retraces the history of immigration to France from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and consists mainly of information panels, photographs and artwork. La Galerie des Dons is constituted by a series of symbolic objects which migrants have donated to the museum and which symbolize a personal story of arrival to France.<sup>32</sup> Conceived on the basis of Mauss’s sociology of the gift as a symbolic exchange, this is perhaps the most original and moving section in the museum.<sup>33</sup> The space for temporary exhibitions, located on the second floor, has already hosted a number of exhibitions on specific aspects of migration, as I will illustrate in the following section of the chapter.<sup>34</sup> Finally, the *médiathèque*, inaugurated in 2012, includes a growing collection of printed and audio-visual material and is rapidly becoming an important point of reference for migration studies in France.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In 2014, the museum was finally inaugurated by President Hollande and changed the name from *Cité* to *Musée*.

<sup>32</sup> Nadia Kiwan, ‘Remembering on the City’s Margins: the *Musée de l’histoire de l’immigration* in Paris’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 25.4 (2017), 426-40.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/missions/la-museographie/la-galerie-des-dons> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/missions/la-museographie/les-expositions-temporaires> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/missions/la-diffusion-des-savoirs/la-mediathèque-abdelmalek-sayad> [accessed 10 September 2018].

Despite the attempts to make the museum interactive and appealing to different kinds of public, the colonial origin of the building has undoubtedly remained a “giant elephant” in the room at Porte Dorée. Indeed, a number of elements at MNHI appear to confirm that, paraphrasing Mbembe, France may well have formally decolonized its colonies, but still needs to decolonize herself.<sup>36</sup> Firstly, MNHI appears *de facto* spatially “squeezed” by the preserved colonial building, in between the triumphal façade, with the inscriptions of gratitude to the soldiers and explorers who enabled the colonial expansion in the world, the positivizing images of French colonialism emanating from the frescoes and bas-reliefs, and the exotic aquarium on the lower floor. Such colonial building could have been deconstructed from its original function and adapted to the contemporary historical context in many ways. For example, in the new refurbishment project at the Royal Museum for Central Africa located in Tervuren, near Brussels, the visitor is invited to access not from the main entrance but through another building which serves as an antechamber to prepare the visitor to the original building, thus creating a metahistorical discourse.<sup>37</sup> In such re-reading of the original museum space, which will be reopened in late 2018, there is a clear attempt to de-construct and subvert the message of colonial supremacy, signalling that Belgium’s colonial and racist past is no longer ignored but exposed in a new perspective for the visitor. A similar experiment could have easily been attempted at Porte Dorée where, instead, the fact that access is controlled through the main entrance, with its imposing staircase, somehow hints at continuity with the previous function and mentality. Thus, the fact that such a triumphal homage to French colonialism as the Palais de la Porte Dorée

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<sup>36</sup> See Achille Mbembe, ‘La France et l’Afrique: décoloniser sans s’auto-décoloniser’, *Le Messenger*, 27 September 2005 (<http://www.multitudes.net/La-France-et-l-Afrique-decoloniser/> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

<sup>37</sup> Felicity Bodenstein and Camilla Pagani, ‘Decolonising National Museums of Ethnography in Europe: Exposing and Reshaping Colonial Heritage’, in Chambers and others (eds.), *The Postcolonial Museum*, pp. 39-49.

was not perceived as controversial by the museum founders and that no curatorial measures were taken to deconstruct its hegemonic frame seem only to confirm that, if formal colonialism ended over fifty years ago, the French public space is still marked not only by an inability to re-work national colonial past, but also by a palpable tone of nostalgia for the lost empire, which is still celebrated between these walls.<sup>38</sup>

To complement these nostalgic undertones, a highly significant space is located few miles from the Palais: the Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale at the Eastern corner of the Paris Bois de Vincennes. While at Porte Dorée the image of French Empire still shines anachronistically preserved, here the pavilions built for the Colonial Exhibition of 1907 lie mostly in a state of ruin.<sup>39</sup> The buildings erected to show the exotic diversity of colonised lands and people in Congo, Indochina, Guiana and Morocco among other countries have been left to remind visitors of the country's colonial past, again without initiating any actual re-working of the site for public use and reflection. This section of the park itself was only reopened in 2007, but nothing suggests that the government or the local municipality aims at transforming this precious site into a veritable heritage for future generations. When thinking of the powerful role that such a rare place could play in changing perspective and exposing the colonial gaze which still marks how France looks at the Other, if transformed into an open air postcolonial museum, it appears clear that this state of ruin speaks for the inability of addressing and reworking in an ethical light France's colonial past. Ironically, rather than being seen as a symptom of neglect and denial towards the nation's imperialist past, such a place is more often

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<sup>38</sup> See Fiona Barclay (ed.), *France's Colonial Legacies: Memory, Identity and Narrative* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> For a reflection on the site and its history, see Thomas B. Reverdy and Sylvain Venayre, *Le Jardin des Colonies* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017). See also Anna Blair, 'The Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale: Ruins of France's Colonial Past', 13 December 2012, <https://untappedcities.com/2012/12/13/the-jardin-dagronomie-tropicale-ruins-of-frances-colonial-past/> [accessed 10 September 2018] and Isabelle Lévêque, Dominique Pinon and Michel Griffon, *Le Jardin d'agronomie tropicale* (Paris: Actes Sud-CIRAD, 2005).

described as a charming and romantic secret spot for weekend visitors, as suggested in a newspaper article,<sup>40</sup> thus neutering any chance for this park to act as signifier of the colonial horrors enacted in these very buildings. It must not be forgotten that it was in one of these pavilions - the one representing Congo - that an actual “human zoo” was staged for the education and entertainment of the curious Europeans.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, this space can be seen as highly symbolic of the state of uncertainty in which the French government finds itself regarding an elaboration of their past of domination.

Moving back to Porte Dorée, the well-preserved grand Salle des Fêtes (which ironically could be translated as ‘celebration hall’) on the ground floor is emblematic, in a different way, of the same attitude of denial (figure 9). Although the museum has received much criticism since its opening, I argue that it is the anachronistic, intact preservation of this space that interferes more heavily with the creation of a more inclusive discourse on citizenship in this building. Indeed, Ducos de la Haille’s large colonial frescoes occupying the four sides of the hall continue undisturbedly to celebrate French civilizing mission around the world. Different scenes portray French colonizers teaching the use of medicine, exporting Catholicism to rural areas, implementing agricultural techniques and opening schools for the native populations. If these images still contribute to embellishing and justifying the colonial enterprise, the most uncomfortable presence probably remains the fresco located at the opposite side of the public entrance, the one that the visitor sees first (figure 10).

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<sup>40</sup> Vincent Vériér, ‘Le jardin tropical oublié du bois de Vincennes’, *Le Parisien*, 16 July 2005, <http://www.leparisien.fr/val-de-marne/le-jardin-tropical-oublie-du-bois-de-vincennes-16-07-2005-2006129411.php> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>41</sup> Concerning human zoos and the display of “exotic” indigenous populations from the colonies see Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Eric Deroo, Sandrine Lemaire and Charles Forsdick (eds.), *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).



**Figure 9. The Salle des Fêtes with its frescoes, view from the public entrance. The MNHI is located on the first and second floor (© Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration).**

This scene constitutes an allegory of France as a civilizing and pacifying power. At the centre of the composition, a woman representing France wears a red toga and holds Europe in one hand and the dove, symbol of peace, in the other.<sup>42</sup> She is surrounded by four other women, each representing a different continent: Asia and Oceania on the left, respectively embodied by a woman on a white elephant, and one sitting on a marine creature; America and Africa on the right, the first represented by a woman next to a skyscraper and the second by a female figure leaning on a black elephant. In this fresco, the aim of the painter was clearly to depict the glory of the French empire at its maximum expansion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, honouring the unifying, universalising power of the Republic in its politics of peace after conquest.

If the preservation of such artwork belonging to France's history is certainly essential as a major evidence and illustration of the

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.palais-portedoree.fr/fr/decouvrir-le-palais/larchitecture-du-palais/les-fresques-du-forum/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

Eurocentric colonial rhetoric, the feeling during the visit is that this message is insufficiently re-dimensioned and that not enough counter-discourse has been elaborated by the curatorial team. It is indeed alarming that, except for a few paragraphs on the museum's website, the same mentality that enabled slavery and exploitation is not explicitly condemned in the explanatory panels and material, to the point that the colonial discourse appears intact to the visitor, in all its exoticized and idealised presentation of the world order. As Maryse Fauvel has pointed out, this paradox between a clear interest for the 'other' and an inability to acknowledge and abandon the colonial gaze is easily detectable not only at MNHI but also at Musée du Quai Branly, another emblematic example in Paris of a lack of deconstruction of the hegemonic narrative typical of museums dealing with non-Western art and cultures.<sup>43</sup> In the elusiveness with which French expansionism is disavowed in similar public spaces, the colonial discourse appears paradoxically resumed and updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, somehow overflowing onto the discourse on contemporary immigration, which appears as just another context in which to affirm French national values onto migrants as "exotic" subjects.

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<sup>43</sup> According to Fauvel, 'dans ces deux musées, on assiste à un nouveau phénomène paradoxal: tout en exprimant clairement un intérêt pour l'autre, ces musées dissimulent à peine l'héritage colonial et reprennent des discours et concepts coloniaux', Maryse Fauvel, *Exposer l'autre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), p. 32.



**Figure 10. Details of the fresco representing an allegory of France surrounded by the four continents (© Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration).**

How can the story of immigrants be narrated ethically, in such a controversial site? The urgent task of the postcolonial museum, according to New Museology, is to provide critical tools to deconstruct outdated and hegemonic narratives. In this sense, the Palais de la Porte Dorée cannot be considered a postcolonial museum: its narrative presents an almost neutral account of colonization which is never explicitly condemned. What is more, this very hegemonic tone of the colonial frame transfers to the section dedicated to migration, influencing its display.<sup>44</sup> Here, indeed, the museum seems more concerned with the enunciation of a unitary and positive story of immigration to France than with the attempt to tailor this story around and with the subjects whose experience the institution aims at

<sup>44</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration, 'Race' and Ethnicity in Contemporary France* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 255-56.

representing. The narrative thread in the permanent section is, from the very first panels, the notion of Frenchness. Such approach puts individual stories of migration into a teleological perspective, by mainly focusing on the contribution of immigrants to the national economic and cultural development, and their successful integration in the national body. The history of immigration to France, therefore, transforms into the narration of how different waves and kinds of migrants have been successfully absorbed into French society, in short “how foreigners have managed to become French”. Not only does this become a partial account often omitting episodes of violence and intolerance which would contradict a supposedly welcoming spirit of French institutions towards immigrants, but it shifts the focus from the nature and complexities of migration to a celebration of national unity and to the validity of the French integration system. What should be a comprehensive narrative on transnational mobility, then, carefully avoids tackling the present criminalization of migration at a European level, thus omitting a great part of what a visitor would expect to see explored and analysed in the museum. Such silences, indeed, appear revealing of the difficulty of integrating highly political and uncomfortable episodes in a migration narrative that aims at representing France’s successes of welcoming and integration.

A further illustration of how the discourse on migration appears framed by hegemonic narratives was the inauguration speech pronounced by the then French President François Hollande in 2014. The mere fact that this speech unusually occurred seven years after the museum opening seems to already indicate the government’s resistance, or perhaps uncertainty, towards a clearer political role that the museum should play in the public sphere. However, the president’s address constituted not only an exemplary case of patriotic rhetoric, but also a chance to stress the achievements of the government with regards to national security and unity, to reinforce republican values and to implicitly validate the French model of integration based on



assimilation. The long speech did insist on the positive contributions of migrants to the building of French Republic over the centuries, but made no reference to the contemporary claims of undocumented migrants present on the French territory, or to the protracted humanitarian crisis in Calais.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, an architectonic context such as the Palais de la Porte Dorée would have been the ideal place to confront France's imperialistic endeavours. On the contrary, the only mention of the colonial heritage of the building was incidental to a positive depiction of French past and present values: 'Ce lieu qui avait été celui de l'exposition coloniale, allait devenir le musée de toutes les immigrations, de toutes les fiertés après avoir été ce lieu où des peuples avaient exposé devant le colonisateur, leurs plus belles réussites'.<sup>46</sup> And later in the speech, the museum's aim is declared as follows: 'mesurer l'apport des immigrés et de leurs descendants, leur apport à la Nation. Par le sang versé, par le travail, par le talent, par la réussite'. And finally 'comme si le pays d'origine venait ici s'offrir au pays d'accueil, c'est-à-dire à la France'.<sup>47</sup> Such rhetoric on French values appeared substantially unchanged from colonial times, or perhaps renewed in a clear tone of colonial nostalgia, while patriotism remained the core element of Hollande's controversial statements on 'cette grande Nation qui s'appelle la France'.<sup>48</sup> Finally, in this partial account of French migration policies, no acknowledgement was made of the *banlieue* riots of 2005, for example, as symptoms of failure of national integration strategies, or of any implementation of the asylum system for refugees in public agendas for the future. The president's speech, therefore, seemed to shape the function of this museum into a mere emanation of patriotic values, thus simplifying the complexity of migration

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<sup>45</sup> See François Hollande, 'Discours d'inauguration du Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration', <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-d-inauguration-du-musee-de-l-histoire-de-l-immigration/> [accessed 20 March 2015].

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

experiences into an easy “happy ending” story in which the struggles of integration are rewarded by France’s assimilation of the foreigner. Also on this occasion, then, the discussion on migration appeared *de facto* sabotaged by the discourse on Frenchness.

The examples illustrated above suggest that MNHI represents an ambiguous political statement pronounced by a French government that struggles to reconcile its formal duty towards asylum seekers and migrants with an insisting rhetoric of national unity and security, especially in the years of recurring terrorist attacks in French cities. Overlooking decades of postcolonial reflections, the museum points towards a narrative of continuity, not so much between colonized countries of the past and contemporary migrations from those same countries, but rather of the uninterrupted opposition between Frenchness and otherness, which can only be resolved with the elimination or the softening of difference. Ultimately, the stress on national identity, the lack of a clear opposition to colonial mentality, the absence of a clearer address to the present status of migrants in France and in Europe, all connote the MNHI as a missed chance to create a much-needed counter-discourse to the hegemonic representation of migration stories available in mainstream media. In contrast with the tendency of New Museology to integrate official state representations with bottom-up narratives in collaboration with the public, the MNHI appears to remain a top-down cultural project, in which governmental institutions pronounce the last word in the narrative and direct the debate according to their own agenda. Just like in the fresco on the ground floor, the narrative focus at MNHI remains France and its unitary, universalising notion of Frenchness, while the migrant, similarly to the colonized subjects in the frescoes, is indeed present in the picture, but in a subordinate position to the woman at the centre of the composition, which remains the focus and measure of the entire representation.

Equally problematic is the case of the gallery MEM, a permanent exhibition on migration at Genoa's harbour. Inaugurated in 2011 by the then Italian President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano, this space was initially conceived as the temporary exhibition 'La Merica! Da Genova a Ellis Island', which lasted from 2008 to 2011 but was later expanded and transformed into a permanent display. Differently from the isolated case of MNHI, however, Galata is not the only example of migration museum in its national context. In fact, Anna Chiara Cimoli counted as many as thirty small museums or galleries on the Italian territory dedicated to immigration, emigration or both.<sup>49</sup> Notable examples are the Emigrants' Museum in San Marino, the Museo Narrante dell'Emigrazione in Carmignatello Silano, and the Fondazione Paolo Cresci in Lucca. On the island of Lampedusa, then, Askavusa opened Porto M, an original attempt to create an anti-institutional museum by gathering everyday objects rescued from boats that were used for the sea passage by migrants.<sup>50</sup> Although the project of opening a national migration museum was already discussed at the Chamber of Deputies in 2013,<sup>51</sup> as of 2018 Italian migration museums are still relatively small institutions administered by local authorities (city council or region) which often cooperate for temporary exhibitions and archive projects, but remain distinct realities. Nonetheless, in December 2016, it also seems that first steps were made by the Italian government to choose Genoa as the site of a future national museum on migration inspired by both the one in Ellis Island and the one in Paris.<sup>52</sup> If this decision reveals an interest on the part of local and state authorities to devote a public space to an institutional debate on

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<sup>49</sup> See Cimoli, 'Migration Museums in Europe', pp. 313-30.

<sup>50</sup> About Askavusa's activity and Porto M, see chapter 4.

<sup>51</sup> Camera dei Deputati, 'Disposizioni per l'istituzione e il funzionamento del Museo nazionale delle migrazioni', 15 December 2013, [http://www.camera.it/dati/leg17/lavori/schedela/apriTelecomando\\_wai.asp?codice=17PDL0010740](http://www.camera.it/dati/leg17/lavori/schedela/apriTelecomando_wai.asp?codice=17PDL0010740) [accessed 21 February 2016].

<sup>52</sup> Andrea Sessarego, 'Galata Museo del Mare: i progetti per il 2016', *Mente Locale*, 21 December 2015, <http://genova.mentelocale.it/67946-genova-galata-museo-mare-progetti-2016/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

migration, the case of Genoa illustrates how including contemporary migration in a pre-existing museum can lead to curatorial problems similar to the ones encountered at the MNHI.

Even more than in the French case, Italy has struggled to develop a postcolonial methodology both in the academic and public sphere over the last decades. Indeed, postcolonial studies have more often been seen as a borrowing from the Anglo-American area studies, and regarded sceptically as a foreign methodology.<sup>53</sup> However, this is surprising, given the fertility that such an approach offers to re-read Italian history. The Italian peninsula has not only been dominated for centuries by foreign powers, but has also presented, with its *questione meridionale*, a clear case of internal colonization with the national unification of the South by the central government. Furthermore, despite the persistence of a widespread dismissive attitude, the Fascist colonial enterprise in Africa was no softer than the French, Belgian or British. All these elements, repeatedly ignored, silenced, dismissed, make the specificities of the Italian postcolonial position truly urgent and interesting for academic investigation. Later and more slowly than in other countries, a growing debate calls for an examination of the heavy legacy of racialization developed between the end of the 19th century and the Fascist era, which provided a fertile ground for the affirmation of the racial laws in 1938 and for the ideals of white supremacy over African populations.<sup>54</sup>

These burning issues on Italian colonial and racist past are largely absent from the Galata museum. Such absence appears alarming, especially considering the recent episodes of hate crimes occurred in recent years in different Italian cities.<sup>55</sup> To remind us that

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<sup>53</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, 'The Italian Postcolonial: A Manifesto', *Italian Studies*, 69.3 (2014), 425–33.

<sup>54</sup> See Fabrizio De Donno, 'La Razza Ario-Mediterranea', *Interventions*, 8.3 (2006), 394–412.

<sup>55</sup> See Tom Kington, 'Florence gunman shoots Senegalese street vendors dead' and Ylenia Gostoli, 'Protests and questions over killing of Senegal migrant Idy Diene', *Al Jazeera*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/protests-questions->

attitudes of intolerance and systematic racism are not a thing of the past, it must be added that many declared xenophobic and patriotic parties, such as CasaPound or Lega Nord, have recently become normalised presences in Italian politics. Given these tendencies in the national landscape, it remains of primary importance that institutional spaces address these growing attitudes by exposing their rootedness in Italian history.



**Figure 11. The Museo del Mare Galata at Genoa's harbour. The gallery MEM is located on the third floor (© Caterina Scarabicchi).**

The first and most evident issue appears to be the location chosen to host the gallery MEM. This permanent exhibition is located inside the Galata Museo del Mare, a four-storey building opened in 2004 when Genoa was made European Capital of Culture, to be the 'largest maritime museum of the Mediterranean area' (figure 11).<sup>56</sup> The narrative

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killings-senegal-migrant-idy-diene-180308130543754.html [accessed 10 September 2018]; BBC, 'Italy drive-by attack targets immigrants in Macerata', *BBC News*, 3 February 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42930749> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.galatamuseodelmare.it/> [accessed 10 September 2018]. In its few years of activity, the Galata Museum has become an important attraction both for locals, tourists and school groups, with an average of 200,000 visits each year. This success is also due to the marked interactivity of the entire museum display, which, according to the ideas of new museology, concretely appears to be projected around the visitor's experience. The intention of the curators is indeed that of bringing the public closer

thread of the entire complex is the sea as an interface of Genoa's and Italy's history throughout the centuries. Even if more indirectly than in the case of Paris, where the frame was explicitly colonial, the section on migration at Galata too is framed by a discourse of power, which this time is the Italian (and in particular, Genoa's) maritime expertise and supremacy in the course of medieval and modern times.



**Figure 12.** Cristoforo Grassi, *Veduta di Genova nel 1481*, hosted in the ground floor collection (© Museo Galata del Mare).

Because of its strategic position on the Mediterranean Sea, Genoa has always been at the centre of commercial routes between Europe and the Middle East, which enabled it to extend its commercial and military influence in the Mediterranean area and beyond. In fact, the Republic of Genoa preserved an uncontested supremacy across the Mediterranean basin at least from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (for which it received the appellation 'Genova la superba', meaning both proud and magnificent) and founded dozens of commercial colonies in strategic

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to harbour and sea life through several natural-size recreations of ships and boats, like a Genovese galley, a 19<sup>th</sup> century brigantine, the Republic's arsenal and armoury, and through the visit inside an original submarine anchored on the outside of the museum. This direct involvement, together with the abundant use of interactive screens, generates a personal and often emotional response in the visitor, who is invited temporarily to become a boat passenger, an oarsman, an Italian emigrant.

sites between Northern Africa and the Middle East, such as Gibraltar, Crimea and Galata. Such economic expansion based on commerce and warfare enriched the city, which in 1407 also founded the Bank of St George, one of the oldest banks in the world. The maritime expertise which Genoa shared with many other sea cities of the peninsula remained constant throughout the centuries until Italy's unification, when expansionism became a priority of the new country's economic and political agenda. In fact, Genoa's glorious past was strategically retrieved in the nationalistic rhetoric of post-unification period to justify the country's imperialistic ambitions, which aimed at regaining a position of prestige in international relations, which Genoa, like Venice and other cities in the peninsula had enjoyed in previous times.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, celebrating the maritime expertise of this maritime republic, together with the obvious reference to the glories of the Roman Empire, was an essential rhetoric element to legitimize Italian expansionism in the Mediterranean area which remained constant from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the building of Italy's Fascist colonial empire.

A first hint towards such hegemonic discourse is the fact that the Museo del Mare is hosted in what used to be the Arsenal of the Republic of Genoa, the place where ships were built and equipped before leaving for the sea, for commerce, exploration or war purpose. The original building, dating from the 1500s, was refurbished to host the museum's permanent exhibitions, but still contains many references to its previous function. In fact, the first two floors are entirely dedicated to the history of Genoa as a maritime power from the Middle Ages until today and discuss sea culture as a tradition of exchange, mobility and dialogue but also hostility and warfare in the Mediterranean. The painting located at the very beginning of the permanent exhibition poignantly summarises the perspective adopted by the curators (figure

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<sup>57</sup> See Fabrizio De Donno and Neelam Srivastava, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Italy', *Interventions*, 8.3 (2006), 371-79.

12). It portrays an imposing view of Genoa's fleet about to leave the city's harbour to bring military support to Pope Sixtus IV against the Ottoman Empire. By presenting a celebration of the republic's hegemonic position in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this image seems to emblematically set the tone of the entire display. Indeed, this perspective continues in the next rooms, and on the upper floor, which host different sections on crucial episodes of Genoa's relation to the sea up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Genoa's history of maritime and military excellence is indeed essentially evoked in the museum's very name, which refers to the Genovese colony located in the quarter of Galata in Istanbul conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. This reference appears to powerfully connote this space within colonial reminiscences not only of the Renaissance times, but also of unified Italy. However, it crucially seems to be part of a wider congratulatory rhetoric of Italian endeavours both before and after its unification, which through the museum's collection establishes continuity between distant and more recent periods of maritime competitiveness and expansionism.

A similar hegemonic subtext is also reflected in the MEM gallery itself, which is located on the third floor. Firstly, because of its position, the visitor usually reaches this gallery after seeing the two lower floors of exhibition. Like in the case of the Paris museum, such arrangement appears to betray a hierarchy between the overarching theme, in this case the sea, and the theme of migration approached in this section. The discourse on expansionism, in fact, appears to continue at least in the first part of the exhibition, which is dedicated to Italian emigration. Here, before presenting the stories of contemporary mobility to Italy, migration is first of all presented as an experience which involved about 13 million Italian nationals who, between 1880 and 1973, left Italy in what has been considered the 'largest voluntary migration in recorded world



history'.<sup>58</sup> This chronological approach is not unusual, and indeed it is shared by MEM with most of the other migration museums in Italy two centuries, which present a strong comparison between Italy as a departure and an arrival country. However, in the case of Genoa, this section particularly resonates with the celebratory tone which distinguished the lower floors of the museum. From the first display panels of MEM, migration is discussed as a fundamental component of Italian national identity, since the first mass movements to the Americas coincided with Italy's unification and contributed to the sense of a shared identity, an *italianità*, scattered around the globe.<sup>59</sup> This reference to hegemonic rhetoric is powerfully suggested by the prominent space given to the experience of those Italians migrating to South America, in particular Argentina and Brazil in the exhibition. Those emigrants, in fact, were seen, more than migrants, as colonizers who would recreate Italian communities across the Atlantic and raise Italy's profile internationally through manual labour in factories and plantations and through the creation of settlements in hostile regions.<sup>60</sup> As Mark Choate has observed, at the time Italy was an 'emigrant nation'<sup>61</sup> whose citizenship was increasingly defined by a strong component of mobility at the four corners of the world, but despite this peculiarity when compared to other European countries, there was still an insistence on traditional national belonging and patriotic feelings towards Italy as a homeland.

Only at the end of a large section on the legacy of Italian communities in the world does MEM approaches the topic of immigration to Italy. Following a chronological order from 1973, the

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<sup>58</sup> Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom (eds.), *Italian Mobilities* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> See in particular Federico Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896* (Vol. 1) (Bari: Laterza, 1951) and Giuseppe Are, *La scoperta dell'imperialismo: Il dibattito nella cultura italiana del primo Novecento* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1985).

<sup>61</sup> See Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2008).

year in which the trend inverted and arrivals in Italy outnumbered the figures of emigration, the exhibition develops over four small rooms in which the visitor is guided through interactive panels dealing with the numerous shipwrecks of migrant boats occurred near the Italian coasts in the last decade and with a celebration of diverse communities to Italian society.<sup>62</sup> The space dedicated to contemporary migration, therefore, appears extremely limited if compared with the entire museum, but also in proportion to the exhibition devoted to Italian diaspora in the world.

When considering the Museo Galata overall, it seems evident that the frame in which MEM is inserted deeply influences the way present-day migration is narrated. The section dealing with Mediterranean mobilities risks appearing as a last-minute addition to a pre-existing discourse on the sea as a vehicle of Genoa's first and then Italy's expansion in the course of centuries. Like in the case of the MNHI, the institutional funding at Galata appears to confer an intermitting rhetorical tone to the collection, which in conclusion, even when dealing with immigration and different identities, still privileges a unifying narration on *italianità*. Such hegemonic discourse which appears uncritical of Italy's expansionistic past, occupies a central place in the museum, also risking overrunning in those sections on migration which should be devoted to an "opening up" of the narration towards difference and plurality. Burning topics such as citizenship acquisition for first and second-generation migrants, which has been discussed in Italian politics at least for the last twenty years, are only superficially dealt with. It would have been useful, instead, to explore the implications of the tradition of *jus sanguinis* in Italy, still profoundly anchored to notions of blood lineage, as Lombardi-Diop and Romeo

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<sup>62</sup> See the museum catalogue Pierangelo Campodonico (ed.), *Memoria e Migrazioni: 1. Le migrazioni italiane oltreoceano; 2. Dalla terza classe ai barconi* (Genoa: Tipografia Europa, 2014).

have rightly pointed out,<sup>63</sup> and therefore betraying the fact that *italianità* is deeply imbricated with racial undertones limiting the access to rights to non-white, non-European individuals.

As previously discussed, a museum becomes postcolonial in the moment its curatorial choices manage to acknowledge and deconstruct its original meaning belonging to a colonial era. Neither of the examples analysed, however, can be considered to have accomplished a postcolonial discourse. In fact, both MEM and MNHI appear to be spatially and symbolically dominated by the museum's previous function and by everything that precedes them in the visit itinerary. In the French and the Italian buildings, the visitor is invited to follow a path which, room after room, adds to the very rhetorical power of the institution. Particularly for the French case, the unproblematised contiguity with the previous collections seems to suggest that the migrant is subjected to the same processes of othering to which the colonised "other" was exposed. The indirectness with which migration is discussed appears similar to the way in which imperialism and colonialism, even when explicitly referred to by the building's history, ultimately remain unquestioned in the public sphere.

### **3.3 Dissent and Solidarity within the Museum: Moving Towards "New" Migration Museums?**

How can an ethical discourse on migration been pronounced from these spaces, given these controversial premises? If both MNHI and MEM appear to be framed by hegemonic, institutional discourses, does this compromise their ability to become relevant to the migration debate? As I have illustrated, neither of the migration museums seems to have truly achieved a postcolonial dimension. However, unlike a novel or a

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<sup>63</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, 'Italy's Postcolonial 'Question': Views from the Southern Frontier of Europe', *Postcolonial Studies*, 18.4 (2015), 367-83.

film, which must usually accomplish a “final” version to be published or distributed, a museum has potentially the ability to evolve over the course of years and adjust its ‘message’ to the public according to new exigencies and new historical contexts. By changing its permanent exhibition, by including new material, both of its own initiative or in response to suggestions and criticism, the museum space can also significantly improve its engagement with civil society and its influence on the visitors. Ultimately, because of the theoretical developments occurred in New Museology in the last decades, but also for their intrinsically composite nature derived by the constant negotiation between funders, curators and visitors, museums are among the best equipped spaces to host an evolving debate on identity, borders, mobility in the public sphere.

Despite their problematic framing within pre-established buildings, both MNHI and MEM also appear to be experimenting different strategies to open their narratives and become spaces of plurality and negotiation for the different stakeholders in society. Beyond their controversial location, the actual sections dedicated to contemporary migration are gradually reproducing the conflicting views about current affairs in the Mediterranean, including dissenting perspectives on European migration policies and the promotion of solidarity towards migrants’ rights. Such changes correspond to the shifting role, as Duncan Cameron has famously observed, from museums as ‘temples’ to museums as ‘forum’, thus also revealing their ability to become places where the most urging political issues are addressed and rethought together with the public.<sup>64</sup>

If looking at what is excluded from the museum narrative is certainly essential, it is equally important to consider the attempts to include elements of dissent, if only temporarily. In the case of MNHI, a

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<sup>64</sup> Duncan F. Cameron, ‘The Museum, A Temple or The Forum’, *Curator*, 14.1 (1971), 11-24.

questioning of the imperialistic frame has occurred not much in the permanent exhibition, but through the programming of poignant temporary events. Indeed, the last few years of activity of MNHI have revealed an attempt to include a plurality of perspectives on migration, and particularly voices of protest towards immigration policies and towards a Europe of borders.<sup>65</sup>

The first element in support of this position is the number and quality of temporary exhibitions which, since the museum's opening, have dealt in detail with contemporary migrations.<sup>66</sup> Inviting experts, artists and activists to collaborate to the museum's meaning-making on identity, marginalization and citizenship has decidedly increased the museum's visibility and ability to attract different kinds of audiences in the last decade. A particularly significant exhibition was 'Frontières' (10 November 2015-3 July 2016) which examined the concept of borders in the contemporary world with a special focus on the European refugee

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<sup>65</sup> A sense of openness and questioning of the possible narratives of the museum is first of all detectable in the presence of the *médiathèque* Abdelmalek Sayad which, as already mentioned, opened in 2012 and contains a growing collection of written and audio-visual material, in addition to hosting a research centre on French immigration. One of the main missions of the curatorial team is to gather activity reports and official documents related to the museum to create a digital archive implementing the information available in the permanent exhibition. Moreover, the museum's research centre publishes the journal *Hommes et Migrations*, one of the oldest periodicals to look specifically at the phenomenon of migration in the French context. Apart from its more traditional role of displaying the history of migration by means of exhibitions, the MNHI is therefore developing a rich material and digital archive that documents the debates concerning issues of migration and integration as they appear in contemporary media, with particular attention to historical and academic publications and to the impact of migration on the arts. Finally, in 2010 the museum has launched a Prix Littéraire awarding a particularly poignant narrative of exile published in French <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/le-prix-litteraire-de-la-porte-doree/le-prix-2017/la-selection-2017-du-prix-litteraire-de-la-porte> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>66</sup> For example, in 2009 the exhibition 'Ma proche banlieue' gathered Patrick Zachmann's photographs which reunited the activity of twenty-five years documenting the experiences of first and second-generation migrants in French peripheries (<http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/musee-numerique/expositions-temporaires/ma-proche-banlieue-patrick-zachmann-photographies-1980-2007> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

crisis in the summer of 2015 and with an open questioning of the existence of borders in a globalised society.<sup>67</sup>

Resulting from the collaboration of twenty specialists, among whom Yvan Gastaut and Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, this exhibition constituted a platform for activists and researchers to voice a choral disapproval of a Europe of multiplying borders and of the scarce response of European governments to the need for different migration policies. A first hint to this critical approach was the exhibition's subtitle: 'Une exposition sur les limites et leurs limites'.<sup>68</sup> Other advertisement posters included the sentence: 'Une exposition sur des murs infranchissables et sur ceux qui les franchissent', which contributed to stress the dissenting tone of the exhibition's narrative.<sup>69</sup> This remarkably rich exhibition included interviews with migrants, artwork, interactive maps, documentary excerpts and a focus on the main origin countries of today's migrants and refugees to France. Starting from a chronology of borders in human history, the visitor was guided through specialised insights into the evolution of European boundaries, and into the different measures adopted to control the movement of foreigners over the decades, with particular attention to the issue of arbitrary detention of asylum seekers and unauthorised migrants in the many *centres de rétention administrative* (CRA) scattered on the French territory. Halfway through the exhibition, a large wall gathered newspaper and magazine covers since the early 2000s, most of which covered the migration crisis of summer 2015. While some of the newspaper covers and articles also documented the anti-immigration positions, the majority of them indirectly uttered a clear statement in favour of welcoming refugees and migrants (figure 13). In the following section of the exhibition, visual and textual

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<sup>67</sup><http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/musee-numerique/expositions-temporaires/frontieres> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

material, art installations and documentary screenings offered the public a deeply critical view on France's political choices regarding migrants' rights, in particular on the militarization of borders and on the increased difficulty for migrants and refugees to gain the right to stay in EU states today. Thus, 'Frontières' represented an important chance to include dissenting points of view and make up for the scarce analysis of contemporary issues in the permanent exhibition, showing a new intention on the part of the curatorial team to take a more complex stance in the migration debate.



**Figure 13. Some of the newspapers covers gathered and displayed at the exhibition 'Frontières' (© Caterina Scarabicchi).**

In addition to temporary exhibitions, in its ten years of activity the MNHI also distinguished itself for organizing a considerable number of conferences, performances, concerts which contributed to address more directly the contemporary debate on migration and borders in Europe.<sup>70</sup> A particularly courageous example was *Ticket*, an

<sup>70</sup> For example, an evening of free events entitled *Décamper* was organised on 6 January 2017. It included a debate conducted by anthropologist Michel Agier and journalists and activists around the recent dismantling of the Calais camp; the

immersive theatre performance staged in 2016 which re-imagined the clandestine arrival of migrants to Europe hiding in a lorry.<sup>71</sup> Created by the Collectif Bonheur Intérieur Brut, a group of actors and activists, many of whom migrants who experienced a similar journey in real life, guided the spectators through a furtive passage around the exterior of the building and then inside a lorry. For about thirty minutes, the participants were kept in the dark and heat of this closed space, meeting other smuggled passengers who progressively revealed their stories to them. At the end of the performance, the doors were abruptly opened by other actors playing the part of border policemen, and all the travellers were 'arrested'. After the performance, which would make the audience experience, even for less than an hour, the hardship and the tension of the clandestine journey, the actors conducted a Q&A session about the development of their project.

This show can surely be analysed critically for its debatable use of the strategies of immersive theatre for the simulation of the clandestine journey, which has caused the death of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers since 2000. For the ethical issues concerning the theatricalization and spectacularization of the experience of arriving in Europe through human trafficking and under illegal circumstances, the show can be considered provocative and perhaps extreme. However, looking beyond these controversial aspects, a most interesting element of the project was the positioning of the lorry used for the performance right in front of the Palais de la Porte Dorée (figure 14). This grammar of juxtaposition between the colonial building and the modern lorry created a powerful visual counter-discourse which, as the artists maintained, made the urgency of unauthorised migration disrupt and interrogate the static and authoritative stance of the

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screening of Sylvain George's documentary *Nocturne Blanc-Chasseur* (2015) and finally a concert organised by Syrian musician Rizan Said with the duo Acid Arab.

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/agenda/2015-10/ticket-5> [accessed 10 September 2018].



building. Even if only temporarily, the current debate on Europe's borders seemed to upstage the imposing colonial façade of the museum.



**Figure 14.** The lorry used for the immersive theatre performance *Ticket* parked in front of the MNHI, May 2016 (© Caterina Scarabocchi).

One last noteworthy element proving that this museum is reworking its place in the public debate on migration is the role it played between 2010 and 2011, during its occupation by a group of undocumented migrants. On 7 October 2010, about 500 illegal workers, mainly from Mali, occupied the MNHI, supported by the CGT trade union group. This protest, aimed at soliciting the government's approval for the regularization of around 6000 undocumented residents, started as a continuous occupation until December, and then led to an agreement between the occupants and the museum administrative team, which allowed them to protest pacifically during the day, without interfering with the normal functioning of the building, to then leave Porte Dorée in the evening and come back the morning after. At the end of January, however, the occupation was

forcibly interrupted in unclear circumstances.<sup>72</sup> As Sophia Labadi stressed, the occupation had a symbolic importance for the public space of the museum, because it offered the chance to challenge the ‘cold historicization and objectification of the immigration movement’ perceivable in the permanent exhibition, and created a temporary meeting ground between institutions, illegal migrants and visitors, in an unprecedented way for a state museum in France.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the occupation made the contemporary struggles for migrants’ regularization in France break the museum’s routine and also represented a chance for the curatorial team to re-think their strategies of impact on society. For four months, the MNHI became a centre of negotiation between institutions and undocumented workers, and on some occasions the staff actually played the role of mediators between the two sides.<sup>74</sup> Albeit involuntarily, and for a very short time, still the museum was directly involved in hearing and communicating the protesters’ claims, briefly transforming itself into a symbolic headquarters for the ongoing debate on migration.

All these different events, whether those organised by the curatorial team or those which spontaneously occurred outside their direction, appear to have successfully started transforming the MNHI into an ‘agonistic’ space of debate and plurality, where different agencies are finding a platform of political expression. Indeed, the museum has hosted a number of festivals, among which Welcome!, which will be one of the case studies in the next chapter. Dissenting voices, whether of experts and curators, or of migrants and activists are being included more frequently and more consistently within this

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<sup>72</sup> See Sophia Labadi, ‘The National Museum of Immigration History’, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 13.3 (2013), 310–30. See also Robin Ostow, ‘Occupying the Immigration Museum: The *Sans Papiers* of Paris at the Site of Their National Representation’, in *Global Mobilities: Refugees, Exiles, and Immigrants in Museums and Archives*, ed. By Amy K. Levin (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 243–65.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 322–23.

<sup>74</sup> Kylie Message, *Museums and Social Activism: Engaged Protest* (London: Routledge, 2014).

institutional context to adjust still-traditional curatorial practices into more complex narratives. If the national rhetoric of cohesion remains an important element of how migration is represented in the Palais de la Porte Dorée, dissenting and even disruptive stories can also be narrated from this museum space, showing the desire and ability to host such a topical debate by aiming for a more plural, complex narration of migration to France, one that brings it closer to the essential notion of 'polyvocality' which is indeed one of the central aspects of New Museology.<sup>75</sup>

The gallery MEM as well, since its opening, has experimented with new strategies to involve the public and render its exhibition more relevant to the current migration debate. In fact, despite the problematic contiguity with a hegemonic discourse on maritime power, its curatorial choices reveal an effort to apply those principles of interactivity and plurality at the basis of the idea of 'new' museums, to the point that MEM can be considered as one of the most innovative attempts to challenge the museum's institutional role in Italy. Two essential aspects seem to encourage this reading: firstly, a radical re-thinking of the museum display, and secondly a hint towards a more flexible approach to migration on the basis on the theme of mobility rather than on that of national identity and citizenship.

Interactivity is indeed the powerful narrative device adopted throughout the MEM itinerary. Before entering the exhibition, a member of staff gives the visitor a passport and a ship boarding pass. By scanning a barcode in different moments during the visit, the public experiences the key moments in the sea journey of several real-life examples of people who left Italy in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached different destinations in north or south America. Thus, the visitor walks through a recreated street in 1870s Genoa, near the harbour where the emigrants would board the ship. In the next room, a

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<sup>75</sup> See Mason, Whitehead and Graham, 'One Voice to Many Voices?', p 173.

boardwalk leads to the inside of a cruise ship and to the third and first-class cabins. Then, the visitor arrives in Ellis Island, and is interrogated by immigration officers. Depending on the passport received at the beginning of the visit, the immigrant will be welcomed or rejected. Throughout this itinerary, archive images, letters, audio and video clips narrate the struggles of migrating abroad, the employment in farms and factories, the relationship with their native country and the legacy of mass migration with the constitution of Italian communities in the world.

The section on emigration is followed by a smaller gallery on contemporary immigration to Italy from 1973, when the country started becoming a hosting rather than a sending nation. Here, the exhibition remains highly engaging, inviting the visitor to continue identifying with the migrant subject. For example, in the section ‘Travel Postcards’ the visitor is invited to listen to the stories of several journeys by sea originated from different countries like Senegal, Niger and Afghanistan, some of which are imaginary accounts because the protagonists, as the visitors discover at the end, died in the 1996 Portopalo shipwreck. However, the highlight of this section appears to be a fishing boat, transported from the island of Lampedusa, which has been used by north African migrants to cross the Mediterranean Sea (figure 15). Barely illuminated, the wooden boat, in its reduced and precarious dimension, emotionally strikes the visitors by evoking danger, hardship and death but also by establishing a direct reference to the crucial topic of EU rescue operations.<sup>76</sup> From the inside of the boat, different headphones relate the stories of the countless shipwrecks of migrant boats occurred from the 1980s to today, with particular reference to the events of 3 October 2013 and 18 April 2015, and to the recurring deaths

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<sup>76</sup> Regarding the Italian political debate, see Stefania Panebianco, ‘The Mare Nostrum Operation and the SAR approach: the Italian response to address the Mediterranean migration crisis’, *EUMedEA Online Working Paper Series*, 3 (2016), 1-27.

of migrants in the Sicilian Channel caused by troubled waters, collisions, boat damages but also delayed and failed rescues.<sup>77</sup>

The decision of isolating such a significant item appears, in the light of New Museology, an extremely powerful curatorial choice: as the only physical object in a dark room dominated by video and audio installations, the boat can be read as an invitation to put aside for a moment everything that happens after the migrant's arrival, isolating the narrative moment of the crossing and redirecting the debate towards a plea for solidarity. Becoming deeply symbolical, in a way that a more traditional collection of several objects could not parallel, the boat converges on itself the public's attention by addressing the sea, *fil rouge* of the entire Museo Galata, from the point of view of precariousness.<sup>78</sup> In fact, any permanence at sea is also a powerful reminder of the precariousness of life, which is today violently brought to the fore with the occurrence of yet another shipwreck at Europe's southern borders.<sup>79</sup> What is evoked in this room is not any longer a sense of *italianità*, but a discourse on *mediterraneità*, to use Lombardi-Diop and Romeo's term,<sup>80</sup> a will to read the Mediterranean Sea as a new opportunity for dialogue, as a shared 'postcolonial' surface, following

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<sup>77</sup> To this regard, see Gabriele Del Grande's blog which still hosts the most comprehensive database on migrants' lives lost at sea from 1988 to today <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>78</sup> The articulated consequences of Italy's relationship with the sea are examined in Iain Chambers' recent works. In *Mediterranean Crossings*, he argues that, in the course of centuries, the Mediterranean has ambiguously represented a basin both dividing and uniting the cultures living on its shores. It has been the setting of maritime domination, conquest and expansionism, but also contributed to the establishment of networks of commerce and cooperation, reciprocal knowledge and peaceful relationships. This tension between hostility and dialogue is at the basis of Chambers' successive elaboration of 'maritime criticism', with which the Mediterranean becomes the starting point for a new theoretical understanding of identity and globalization. See Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, NC, London: Duke University Press, 2008); 'Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks', *PMLA*, 125.3 (2010), 678-84 and *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities* (London, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

<sup>79</sup> In this regard, see Judith Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability and the Ethics of Cohabitation', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 26.2 (2012), 134-51.

<sup>80</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, 'Italy's Postcolonial 'Question': Views from the Southern Frontier of Europe', *Postcolonial Studies*, 18.4 (2015), 367-83.

Chambers's reflections,<sup>81</sup> one that puts into question colonial relationships and neglected human stories. The Lampedusan boat at MEM seems to embody precisely all these innovative strands of critical thinking which, contaminating the postcolonial with an attention towards the “nomadic” and the “migrant”, transcend the idea of the Mediterranean as a basin of maritime supremacy, to re-interpret the sea as a call of duty towards lives in danger and towards the injustices committed in border regimes. The bareness of this room suggests an attempt to go beyond a traditional vision of museums as a narrative relying on descriptions and captions. It is the fishermen's boat, with its material presence alone that seems to redirect the public debate towards essential human rights and the need to adopt more humane measures towards all the thousand migrants who were, are and will be passengers of similar fragile means of transportation.



**Figure 15. The fishing boat transferred from Lampedusa (© Caterina Scarabicchi).**

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<sup>81</sup> See Iain Chambers, ‘The Mediterranean: A Postcolonial Sea’, *Third Text*, 18.5 (2004), 423-433. See also Predrag Matvejević, *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape* (Berkeley, CA, London: University of California Press, 1999).

The style of the display remains highly dynamic and diverse throughout the last room of MEM, with interactive screens and videos clips, aiming at providing definitions of terms such as asylum seeker and clandestine, and facts and figures on the immigrant population in Italy to debunk common stereotypes. In previous versions, this section included a quiz in which the visitor was invited to answer different questions (number of immigrants residing in Italy, relationship between migration and criminality, origins of the larger migrant communities, and so on) and had a chance to test his or her actual knowledge and perceptions on the subject. In the present exhibition, however, this part has been substituted with a section named 'Italiano anch'io', whose objective is to positively portray the contribution of migrants to Italian society and discuss the key role played by public education in promoting a positive attitude towards diversity.<sup>82</sup> Finally, great attention is devoted to video or audio interviews to immigrants. Differently from the MNHI in Paris, however, interviewees are the general public filmed in the streets of Genoa or at the museum, rather than established artists or celebrities, as it was the case for the Paris museum. This further seems to highlight the intention of portraying migration as a widespread, everyday phenomenon, far from the alarmist tones of invasion frequently found in right-wing propaganda, but also from the implicit message that only a few immigrants succeed in adapting to life in the destination country, as the narrative at Porte Dorée suggested.

The second aspect suggesting that MEM is attempting to move towards a more inclusive museum narrative is the constant parallel between Italian emigrants of the past and immigrants arriving to Italy today. Starting from the poster of the permanent exhibition (figure 16) in which an African migrant has been added to an archival image of

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<sup>82</sup> See Giovanna Rocchi, 'Al museo si parla di migrazioni: le attività con le scuole al MEM' in *Memoria e Migrazioni*, pp. 42-53.

Italian emigrants standing on the deck of a ship, the narrative establishes a continuity of human movement which from the mass emigrations of the last 150 years reaches the stories of different immigrant communities. By inviting the visitors to put themselves in the migrants' shoes regardless of the historical context, this narrative and its interactive approach insists on presenting migration as a shared feature of human experience throughout the centuries, and not as a phenomenon to regard as an exception or emergency *per se*. Italian visitors, in particular, who instinctively sympathize with their displaced compatriots presented in the previous exhibition rooms, are then invited to continue the identification throughout the last section in which immigrants from all continents become protagonists. Thus, the section on Italian emigrations can also be read as an indispensable but also strategic premise for a reflection on migration today, a powerful reminder that Italy, like other European countries such as Spain or Greece, simply needs to consider its recent past to look at the present in a new and more tolerant light.



**Figure 16.** The poster of MEM's permanent display (© CISEI).



It is true that resorting to continuity to present migration stories at MEM represents an important attempt to move beyond a narration based on national identity. Indeed, the peculiarity of the Italian case, differently from that of other European countries like France, remains its oscillating identity as both a country of departure and arrival in public narrations. This ambiguous stance appears the decisive element that allows an opening up of MEM's discourse on migration, which adopts mobility, rather than national perspectives, as its overarching theme. This thematic continuity is indeed also the fundamental difference in the way Italy and France are representing migration in the analysed museums: whereas at the MNHI the public discourse on mobility is inserted in the context of a pre-existing discourse on the "other", at MEM present-day mobility is always compared to a time in which Italians were migrants themselves.

Nonetheless, the attempt to merge the figures of migrants of different times and origins also presents significant drawbacks. Firstly, as previously discussed, the fact that the stories of Italian emigrants are narrated before those of immigrants appears problematic. In fact, if this arrangement is mainly determined by a chronological criterion, it also indirectly echoes the hegemonic narrative on *italianità* which started in the previous sections of Museo Galata. In this light, the experience of Italian diaspora becomes a way of reinforcing patriotic values, and new immigrant communities simply become an addition to an already established notion of Italianness. This possible reading seems to be confirmed by the title of the last section of the exhibition: 'Italiano anch'io', referred to the immigrants living in the peninsula today. Secondly, if continuity can be used as a powerful narrative device to highlight that migration is a frequent component of human history, such a juxtaposition also risks levelling out different contingencies and power positions of the migratory experience by dismissing the critical specificity of present-day journeys from Africa to Europe under the slogan that, after all, "we are, or were, all migrants". For example,

comparing Italian emigration to today's African emigration risks failing to adequately stress that most of today's journeys across the Mediterranean are still caused by war or poverty and still need to be undertaken outside of a legal framework. While most Italian emigrants in the past could purchase a regular ticket on a reliable means of transportation, it is sadly well-known that for many African and Middle Eastern migrants nowadays the illegal journey has risky and even deadly consequences. Indeed, insisting on such crucial differences and taking this opportunity to condemn the scarce responsiveness of European institutions to current events would make the exhibition narrative at MEM even more effectively engaged in a discourse on solidarity and human rights. Otherwise, the risk is that the inclusion of African migrants in the museum discourse becomes a mere tokenistic gesture, which fails to alter the conservative representational paradigm of *italianità* based on European identity, still so tangible in the rest of the display.

Indeed, the comparison between Italian emigration and today's immigration does not automatically entail a more ethical or "successful" representation. Burning issues such as Italy's economic deals with African states such as Libya and Niger to prevent migrants from starting the Mediterranean crossing are omitted from the narrative, so as the appalling conditions in which hundreds of refugees live after their asylum has been accepted. The fact that these controversial aspects of the debate are still absent, or superficially included, at MEM, signals that more courageous curatorial choices should be adopted to make this space truly relevant to the present political discussion. Despite these flaws, the present layout does constitute a useful starting point for voicing a call for solidarity towards the growing number of refugees and migrants arriving on Italy's shores. Indeed, the fact that migrants and their journeys become the actual protagonists of the museum narration, regardless of their country of origin, *de facto* subverts the usual paradigm in which the migrant is exclusively portrayed as the Other in

the story, and identifies the migratory itinerary as the basis of a shared mobility. Finally, this narrative seems a viable path to move the discussion on sea journeys away from strict national and citizenship terms and towards a more flexible, transnational representation. The point of strength of MEM is that, by adopting the journey as the *fil rouge* of a discourse on Italian society, it questions the national rhetoric of security and unity by countering it with a gaze on the precarious conditions of the migrant as an individual, and on migration as a phenomenon that needs to be normalised and discussed in different terms. The decision to take the distance from traditional ways of presenting the migrant as the “other” in the national narrative and to develop an evolving, interactive vision of memory, combined both with the attention to the empathetic dimension of the visitor and to the presence of comprehensive and up-to-date facts and figures, make MEM an emblematic case of a new museology which attempts to pave the way towards openness and plurality, proving that museums are also starting to elaborate new formulations in response to the challenges of postcolonial representations of migration.

### **3.4 Representing Migration: Negotiating between Institutional Discourse, Solidarity and Dissent**

Museums are strategically positioned at the meeting point between the state, curators and experts, and the public. Therefore, it is precisely these institutions that could lead the way in elaborating more inclusive, ethical and daring narratives about contemporary migration for European society. However, with notable exceptions, much of EU museums struggle to open their display to plural representations, and continue to offer hegemonic stories based on conservative conceptions of national identity and citizenship. Their narratives about migration appear extremely distant from the lived experiences of illegalised

migrants arriving to Europe, especially when recent stories represented in the media are considered. For example, the news of a sick and pregnant asylum seeker rejected at the Italian-French border in Bardonecchia,<sup>83</sup> or that of Sub-Saharan migrants sold as slaves in Libyan markets;<sup>84</sup> the images of yet another capsized boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, or of the activists of far-right movement Génération Identitaire patrolling the border in the Alps to prevent migrants from entering the French territory.<sup>85</sup> How can the narratives contained in museums make justice to such appalling episodes in contemporary Europe?

Since their origins, museums have been privileged sites typically chosen by national governments to present authoritative, official versions of history and society. In fact, as intrinsically political spaces, museums tend to reproduce established social and political views, which are also revealed through their composite architecture and collections, and the interaction with their context. Together with ethnographic museums, institutions devoted to migration are the places to turn to in order to analyse how institutions present the discourse on national community to the visitor, particularly in relation to colonial and postcolonial issues. Indeed, a most problematic aspect for the analysed cases of MNHI and MEM remains their interaction with hegemonic narrations which originates from their location into pre-established buildings. The framing of a newer migration discourse within an explicitly colonial setting in the Paris case, and within a

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<sup>83</sup> ANSA, 'Respinta confine incinta, muore migrante', *ANSA*, 23 March 2018, [http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2018/03/23/respinta-confine-incinta-muore-migrante\\_e60863f9-363b-4ded-8b91-2566f3881d4f.html](http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2018/03/23/respinta-confine-incinta-muore-migrante_e60863f9-363b-4ded-8b91-2566f3881d4f.html) [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>84</sup> Nima Elbagir and others, 'People for Sale', *CNN*, 14 November 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/specials/africa/libya-slave-auctions> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>85</sup> *Le Monde*, 'Alpes: des militants d'extrême droite bloquent le col de l'Echelle, lieu de passage de migrants', *Le Monde*, 21 April 2018, [http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/04/21/alpes-des-militants-d-extreme-droite-vont-bloquer-le-col-de-l-echelle-lieu-de-passage-de-migrants\\_5288720\\_3214.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/04/21/alpes-des-militants-d-extreme-droite-vont-bloquer-le-col-de-l-echelle-lieu-de-passage-de-migrants_5288720_3214.html) [accessed 10 September 2018].

context celebrating maritime supremacy in the case of Genoa museum, appears to shift the focus of the discourse from mobility to a rhetorical re-affirmation of national values. In both cases, their spatial location and their effective insertion in pre-existing institutions, and therefore discourses, reveal conflicting layers of meaning which problematize their role and tighten them in a network of competing agendas.

Because of the scarce deconstruction of their pre-existing power narratives, the MNHI and MEM can hardly be considered postcolonial. On the contrary, the insertion of a section on migration can even appear to implicitly continue a celebratory discourse on Frenchness and *italianità*. At the Palais de la Porte Dorée, the discussion on colonialism and migration still appears dominated by a state rhetoric on national unity and integration in French values, which appears to move the debate away from the root causes of transnational migration and from the necessity to shape new cultural paradigms for a cosmopolitan community. The simplified way in which historical memory is narrated at MNHI also reinforces the perception of an unresolved colonial past undermining the possibility of addressing today's migration to the EU in the cultural sphere. Such a proximity with a scarcely re-dimensioned colonial discourse suggests that the section on migration, too, should be read as a hegemonic discourse on the Other according to which, regardless of his or her origins, the migrant remains a 'non-', or 'not-yet' French.

Similarly, in the case of Museo Galata, the opening of a permanent section on migration within a museum celebrating Genoa's past glories establishes continuity between the hegemonic discourse on the sea and a reflection on contemporary mobility. The fact that the visitor reaches MEM after walking through a long exhibition on Italy's maritime expansionism suggests that, in this section too, the focus of the display continues to be a celebration of Italian endeavours and values. Indeed, before dealing with migrations in the Mediterranean, the exhibition extensively retraces significant moments of the Italian

diaspora as an essential component of the national identity between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason, the smaller section on present-day immigration to Italy seems to acquire a peripheral role compared to the rest of the museum, raising questions about the possibility to effectively impact the audience.

Furthermore, in both cases another debatable aspect is the tendency to narrate migration as a positive story of integration and mutual benefit for both the migrant and the country of destination. This almost inevitable aspect of a museum wishing to present migration not as a national problem but as an economic, social and cultural resource in countries where xenophobic episodes are on the rise can also contribute to a failure in problematizing the EU's handling of the Mediterranean crisis. In fact, it insists on the narrative of a welcoming attitude but avoids addressing the controversial "push-back" policies and detention sponsored by the same European governments. Indeed, the tendency to maintain an apparently neutral but selective representation of today's mobilities to Europe remains one of the biggest challenges of narrating such a politicised theme as migration in the contemporary public debate. Also due to the limited involvement of migrants in the projects of the permanent exhibitions, these narratives appear to relegate to a corner of the cultural sphere not only the migrant's story, but also their agency.

Despite the curatorial efforts, both museums remain after all imbued in national rhetoric. Nonetheless, the important lesson of New Museology also allowed us to consider MNHI and MEM in a different light, as spaces caught in a transition between their outdated role of repositories of knowledge into more open public arenas, able to host the major debates of contemporary times. In this sense, the diverse temporary events organized by MNHI can be regarded as moments of explicit dissent towards French politics of immigration and integration, and as expression of a push towards more ethically engaged narratives. The growing and diversifying archive, both digital and material, in

addition to a research centre and a *médiathèque* all suggests a clear intention of taking part in a national debate together with migration experts, and the aspiration of becoming a point of reference in the national context. Despite the scarce deconstruction of its original colonial role, it can be concluded that this museum is gradually finding new ways of involving the visitor in a more complex representation of migration stories.

As I have explained, the innovative strategy adopted at MEM and at Museo Galata as a whole is interactivity, a fundamental feature of New Museology. This greater attention to the visitor's presence gives the Genoa museum a markedly different feel compared to the MNHI: encouraging members of the public to actively contribute to the museum narrative, this curatorial choice privileges individual stories and aims at creating a plural representation of Italian society. The attention given to migrant communities through the extensive use of interviews, but also through the explicit invitation to engage personally and emotionally with the stories narrated in the permanent collection become powerful ways to address stereotypes and promote tolerance and solidarity. Although the focus of the display remains anchored to the idea of *italianità*, the parallelism between Italian emigrants and today's immigrants to Italy has started to move the paradigm of narration towards a transnational dimension. This strategic narrative of continuity between Italian emigration and immigration, even at the risk of levelling out very different historical contexts and re-dimensioning the specificity of the present Mediterranean migration crisis, still represents a courageous effort to identify mobility as a recurring aspect of human history and to take the migration debate beyond nationalist narratives. Adopting *mediterraneità* as a more inclusive framework, mobility becomes the shared experience of different communities at different historical times, enabling a more open discourse on national identity based not so much on citizenship and country of origin but as

the itinerary of different people with the same hope for a better life in another land.

The flourishing of many new migration institutions, whether local or national, attests to the urgency to bring migration to the foreground of contemporary cultural debates. Although museums remain crucially linked to the political agenda of their sponsors, the innovative curatorial strategies experimented at the two museums analysed in this chapter also have the potential to redress the power balance in these institutions, showing that they can work towards becoming more plural and democratic places of social negotiation. Indeed, the most important goal that these museums seem to have achieved is not simply the capacity to reproduce an already existing debate, but to initiate a new one through the problematic nature of their context and their exhibitions, thus also reviving a larger discussion about the value of contemporary museums in the global era.

While both institutions illustrate the difficulties of addressing the theme of migration in the public sphere, their presence also provides a crucial opportunity to investigate the ambiguities of national rhetoric on migration, also re-igniting the political debate on colonialism and postcoloniality and *exposing* the need to address the European colonial past. Furthermore, by progressively including dissenting voices in their narrative, these spaces appear increasingly able to transform into plural, ‘agonistic’ spaces, which aim not at reconciling, but at reproducing different sides of major political conflicts in the memorialization of the national past, calling for the reflection and participation of their public. After all, this is exactly the aim of the “new” museum: to present a complex and lively representation of crucial issues of contemporary times, rather than offering a resolved and simplified version of them. By gradually becoming spaces of plural and performative discourses, rather than static hegemonic displays, museums are beginning to occupy a strategic position for experimenting more daring and flexible narratives of



migration, an essential feature that these institutions share with festivals, which are the object of the following chapter.

#### 4. Mises en scène of Migration: “Rehearsing” Community at Italian and French Migration Festivals

‘[T]he spectacle is the main production of present-day society’. (Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, [1967] 2013, p. 8)

If contemporary museums in Italy and France are prime sites where collective narratives of migration are being elaborated for the public, migration festivals too are crucial settings that, for the ways in which they create representations of migration, deserve critical attention. In fact, the spatial layout analysed in the previous chapter for the case of museums typically combines, in cultural festivals, with the temporary “exceptionality” of either a one-off or a recurring event taking place in a specific public location. Hence, in this chapter I turn to the analysis of migration festivals both to highlight the unique features with which these events can contribute to the present debate on migration to Europe, and to discuss their essential role in building new forms of solidarity networks for migrants’ rights.

In the course of human history, temporary events have represented crucial manifestations of community spirit and interrogations about shared identities.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as ‘themed, public events’, to use Donald Getz’s definition,<sup>2</sup> festivals can be regarded as veritable collective rites that reinforce pre-existing values or mobilize

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<sup>1</sup> Event and festival studies are rapidly expanding fields of enquiry, which Donald Getz has divided into three major strands: the first one looks at the ‘roles, meanings and impacts’ of festivals in relation to civil society; the second investigates the evolution of festival tourism, while the third is concerned with festival management. For the purpose of this chapter, I have referred primarily to the first strand, which specifically examines the aims –desired or realised to different extents– of festivals to create social cohesion and sensitivity towards a determined political issue (see Donald Getz, ‘The Nature and Scope of Festival Studies’, *International Journal of Event Management Research*, 5.1, (2010), 1-47). See also Sonia Tascón, *Human Rights Film Festivals: Activism in Context* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli and Gerard Delanty, *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Getz, *Event Management and Event Tourism* (2nd ed.) (New York: Cognizant, 2005), p. 21.

participants in favour of new ones, building, as Victor Turner suggested, a particular kind of ‘spontaneous *communitas*’ through a celebratory atmosphere of common interests.<sup>3</sup> It is often during festivals that the emergence of new community concerns can be detected; however, it is also on these gathering occasions that power relations become more explicit and visible to the public eye, allowing these events to be seen as complex moments of negotiation between the stakeholders of the local and national communities involved. In this sense, festivals are, as Maria Larson and Ewa Wikström have stressed, ‘political market squares’ in which both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic actors, such as institutions, associations and alternative networks, display themselves for the audience, in order to bring forward their specific political agenda.<sup>4</sup> As crucial moments of collective interaction, temporary events can become deeply symbolic, and representative, of a given political moment in the community where they take place.

While cultural festivals can be analysed in their different components (for example, by looking at an exhibition or a film screening included in their programming), it is their unique aspect of celebratory nature, of festivity as such to determine their relevance to the debate on representing contemporary migration. Benefitting from that ‘collective effervescence’,<sup>5</sup> which Émile Durkheim already in 1912 identified as a key element in public gatherings, festivals establish a critical relationship both with what Stuart Hall called the ‘spectacle of the “Other”’,<sup>6</sup> and with Nicholas De Genova’s idea of the ‘border spectacle’.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Hall’s idea referred to the way in which images and

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner, *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Larson and Ewa Wikström, ‘Organizing Events: Managing Conflict and Consensus in a Political Market Square’, *Event Management*, 7 (2001), 51–65.

<sup>5</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Glencoe Free Press, [1912] 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage and Open University, 1997), p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas De Genova, ‘Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31.1 (2002), 419–47. See also Paolo Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del*

captions render minority subjects ‘other’ from national identity in visual culture, by stressing their perceived alterity and their ‘foreignness’, De Genova’s reflection has denounced the transformation of the coasts of Southern Europe into a sensationalist media stage for the depiction of undocumented foreigners as threatening masses. Yet, while the two authors used “spectacle” in a negative sense to highlight an evident tendency in the representation of contemporary migration to Europe, the same term, when referred to the realm of arts and culture, acquires a positive connotation and becomes synonymous with festivity and the celebratory, creative display of community.

At a moment when the reduction to spectacle appears inevitable in a mass media society, festivals appear to have the potential to replace the spectacle of emergency and of the “others” with an atmosphere of exceptionality, provided this time by creative arts, through which to reconsider the theme of migration. Of the many angles from which the convergence of migration and festivals could be approached, I have therefore chosen that of the notion of spectacle to address its productive ambiguity. Indeed, festivals are the cultural products which establish the strongest link with this very concept: the *mise en scène*, the staging and the show, with which migration is made spectacular in the media, are all essential parts of the grammar of festivals as unique cultural manifestations. Therefore, this final chapter engages with the creative responses offered during temporary events, examined as collective narratives which aim at restructuring networks of community and solidarity, and potentially at impacting society beyond the event’s participants.

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*confine*, and Paolo Cuttitta, “Borderizing the Island Setting and Narratives of the Lampedusa ‘Border Play’”, *ACME*, 13.2 (2014), 196-219.

#### 4.1 Spectacles of Dissent, Spectacles of Community

Festivals have been constantly present, throughout centuries, as an essential part of social interaction. However, it is only in the last decades that their number has grown exponentially, creating a rich landscape of festivals dedicated to the most diverse topics.<sup>8</sup> Migration festivals are certainly part of this trend, growing in number and diversity across the globe, but precisely for their recentness and their variety, they have only lately started to be scholarly examined.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the wider field of festival studies, which lies at the conjunction of anthropology, management and cultural studies is in itself a new-born area of inquiry, which in the last ten years has seen the first mapping attempts.<sup>10</sup> The same can be observed for specific sub-fields such as film festivals, which have only originated as systematic studies a decade ago.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, despite sharing important connections with the concept of spectacle, temporary events have scarcely been analysed in relation to contemporary migration: the analyses elaborated within migration studies so far have remained essentially separate from the field of event studies, and even when the two converge in migration festivals, their respective academic traditions have rarely been brought together.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> See Donald Getz, *Event Studies: Theory, Research and Policy for Planned Events* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> See for example the recent migration festivals held in France (Festival Cinéma Migrations, Festival Les Yeux Ouverts sur la Migration), Slovenia (Festival of Migrant Film) and Belgium (Festival Cinéma Méditerranéen). Regarding the existing studies on migration festivals, see Marijke De Valck, 'Film Festivals and Migration' in *The Encyclopaedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. by Immanuel Ness (vol. 3), (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 1502-1504.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the consolidation of Event Studies as a discipline see Getz, 'The Nature and Scope of Festival Studies', and Getz, *Event Studies*.

<sup>11</sup> See in particular the St Andrews series Film Festival Yearbooks, and specifically the tables at the end of the fourth volume, which compile a list of world film festivals dedicated to diaspora and migration: Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (eds.), *Film Festivals and Activism* (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> The booming field of film festival studies is still mainly examined within film studies, without linking it to the methodology of event studies (see the case of De Valck's *Film Festivals*), while activist film festivals are analysed more for the typology of films

aim of this chapter is therefore to redress this gap and commence a dialogue between these two fields by looking at the specificity of festivals as cultural events, and at migration as a prominent and highly debated theme of contemporary culture that revives but also challenges the nature of issue-based festivals. More precisely, how is the spectacle brought forward by festivals representing the phenomenon of contemporary migration and their protagonists? How do such events affect or interact with the place in which they are organized, differently from other cultural representations on the page, on the screen or at the museum? What are their limitations, and finally, what are the chances of going beyond the “migrant’s corner” within the format of festivals?

Festivals today appear to constitute one of the few stages from which dissent towards national policies is clearly voiced in the public sphere, in an interplay between what Donald Getz called ‘convergent and divergent forces’, indicating those common or, vice versa, opposite interests defended by the different social actors who take part in the festival moment.<sup>13</sup> Compared to the media considered in the previous chapters of this thesis, planned events appear to constitute a more evident expression precisely of those different ‘agonistic forces’ which, according to Mouffe, battle to gain consensus in the ‘public space’, namely the arena of visibility in which politics and arts typically merge, or clash, by means of cultural representations.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, sharing many features with theatre, festivals can be essentially analysed as

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screened than for their being “festivals” (see Iordanova and Torchin (eds.), *Film Festivals and Activism*).

<sup>13</sup> Donald Getz, ‘The Forms and Functions of Planned Events: Past and Future’, in *The Future of Events and Festivals*, ed. by Ian Yeoman, Martin Robertson and Una MacMahon (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 20–34 (p. 23).

<sup>14</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, ‘Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?’, Cork Caucus, 2005, [https://readingpublicimage.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/chantal\\_mouffe\\_cork\\_caucus.pdf](https://readingpublicimage.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/chantal_mouffe_cork_caucus.pdf) [accessed 10 September 2018] and Chantal Mouffe and Jorinde Seijdel (eds.), *Art as a Public Issue: How Art and Its Institutions Reinvent the Public Dimension* (Rotterdam, Amsterdam: NAI Publishers, 2008).

performances which support, but more often contest, established political balances at a certain historical moment.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, resonating with those recent advancements in performance studies that privilege nomadic performativity over fixed narratives, and a plurality of voices over singular ones,<sup>16</sup> the festivals' collective *mise en scène* appears to possess the ability to create innovative and subversive community narrations in line with both Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of *carnavalesque*<sup>17</sup> and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed,<sup>18</sup> thus attempting to "reverse" the hegemonic *status quo* of the social context for the duration of the temporary event. This appears particularly the case in community festivals, namely small-scale events originating from the local inhabitants of the place hosting the event. Indeed, community migration festivals typically become a statement of solidarity with migrants within an often-hostile setting, for example in a country which has taken explicit position against welcoming refugees. In larger events as well, however, festivals as performances of dissent can enable the organisers to gain greater visibility in the area and beyond, but also to literally "count" the participants of new identity networks, which the event will help to consolidate.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the prerogative of temporary events about migration resides precisely in this physical gathering of the participants in a same location over a specified time period, to perform a call for

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<sup>15</sup> See the seminal work John Langshaw Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge; Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962) and Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> On performance theory, see Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York, London: Routledge, 1996) and Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> For the persistence of Bakhtin's notion of *carnavalesque* in contemporary forms of political dissent, see Andrew Robinson and Athina Karatzogianni, *Power, Resistance, and Conflict in the Contemporary World: Social Movements, Networks, and Hierarchies* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the performative and cultural turns in the Arts, see David Chaney, *Cultural Turn: Scene-Setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1994).

solidarity and informed citizenship against the discourses of hostility suggested by European policies.

Parallel to the effort to strengthen local communities, the other crucial aspect of festivals directly relevant to the migration debate is the way in which they typically combine their local dimension with a global consciousness. As Sonia Tascón has observed in regard to human rights film festivals, such events are inevitably rooted in their geographical location, but are also international by nature, since they focus on the interaction and relationality between distant communities which are linked by common concerns.<sup>20</sup> As most events dedicated to social issues and global challenges, migration festivals too can be observed to function as networks of cosmopolitanism, here intended as an ethical concern for near and far-away others or, in Michel Agier's words, a desire of 'sharing the world, no matter how inegalitarian or violent this may be'.<sup>21</sup> The concern for transnational mobility that inspires migration festivals is in fact not only the shared interest of organisers and participants, but also the element that links one event to other distant ones, generating a constellation of poles scattered around the globe, from where migrants' rights abuses are collectively denounced.

This was the case, for example, of recent film festivals relying on large international associations, such as the IOM global migration film festival, which in 2016 took place in 89 countries and included over 200 free screenings, or the Human Rights Watch Festival during which, since its launch in 2009, numerous documentaries on global human movements have been screened.<sup>22</sup> However, smaller and more locally-funded initiatives as well are essential parts of these cosmopolitan networks, as demonstrated by the success of *Migrant'scène*, a nationally-coordinated but locally managed migration festival of La

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<sup>20</sup>Tascón, *Human Rights Film Festivals*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Agier, *Borderlands*, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> For the festivals organized by IOM and HRW, see respectively <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-uk-promoting-integration-inclusion-through-migration-film-festivals> and <https://ff.hrw.org/> [accessed 10 September 2018].



Cimade association, held across most French regions since 2013.<sup>23</sup> All these examples suggest that migration festivals, through the works of local, national and international associations, have already shown the ability to empower global communities through local ones, and vice versa, but also to generate, as Iordanova and Cheung have powerfully suggested retrieving Benedict Anderson's expression, 'imagined communities' of their own,<sup>24</sup> which are "rehearsed" during festivals, towards a social mobilization in favour of tolerance and freedom of movement.

The ultimate ambition of most festivals is therefore to impact both the local and the international community. However, despite the growing popularity of festivals at a global level, there are also numerous underlying tensions at the basis of such planned events. Firstly, similar to the other cultural products analysed in the previous chapters, an urgent question resurfaces: which audience can migration festivals effectively impact? The same risk of "preaching to the converted" observed in novels, films and museums is detected even more significantly in public events that aim at sensitizing the participants towards migrants' rights, which typically attract a section of the public already responsive to the topic. Migration festivals, like most issue-based initiatives, seem to appeal to social groups who are already interested and active in the defence of migrants, such as migration scholars, activists and students. If such is the case, can these events really be considered widely effective for society, or do they remain *niche* products? To what extent is it possible to involve different and also uninterested members of society in a migration festival?<sup>25</sup> The issue of the impact on the audience is tightly connected to a second inevitable aspect of festivals: their impermanence. As both De Valck and Tascón

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<sup>23</sup> Migrant'Scène, <https://www.migrantscene.org/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>24</sup> See Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung (eds.), *Film Festivals and Imagined Communities* (St Andrews: St Andrews University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Donald Getz, 'Why festivals fail', *Event Management*, 7.4 (2002), 209-221.

showed regarding the case of film festivals, temporary events may well have the potential to question established power relations and narrations, but this is often just for the duration of the event itself.<sup>26</sup> Since festivals are, after all, ephemeral moments of community convergence over a limited space-time nexus, what happens to their collective festivity when the event is over? While the limited duration of festivals is a crucial element that guarantees their “exceptionality”, this also affects their ability to leave a more permanent impression and effect on the communities of organisers and participants alike.

Finally, as political events, planned festivals often remain the expression of vested interests of image and place marketing.<sup>27</sup> In particular, for small and large-scale events alike, tourism is still a predominant aspect of festival projects, influencing the target audience and the programming of the entire event. As Getz has underlined, festivals are not only held to gather participants around a specific theme, but also to requalify and promote the local area in which the event will be held, as part of strategic marketing planning.<sup>28</sup> When this is referred to festivals about migration, then, could the theme of mobility also be considered as a mere pretext for a festival which is actually more focused on promoting local attractions instead? To what extent is there a risk of commodification? This controversial aspect also revives the ethical implications of publicly celebrating such a delicate issue as migration in Italy or France in a historical moment when displaced individuals are detained and abused in most European states. In the case of migration festivals, then, is there not also the risk for festivals to indulge in further spectacularizing migration with the excuse of positivizing it, making organisers and participants once again accomplices of the ‘spectacle of the “Other”’, of the ‘spectacle of the border’? Often, the degree of “ambiguity” of festivals is after all dictated

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<sup>26</sup> See Tascón, *Activist Film Festivals*, and De Valck, *Film Festivals*.

<sup>27</sup> Getz, ‘The Nature and Scope of Festival Studies’, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

by the event's sponsors: who is funding the organising committee, then, and how is the risk of evidently conflicting interests contained?

While there is no definitive answer to these problematic questions, precisely for their ephemeral and controversial politics migration festivals become ideal case studies to investigate the constant re-negotiations and conflicts between the social stakeholders. This chapter focuses on two festivals, markedly different one from the other, both part of an extremely vital and rapidly developing corpus of cultural events about migration. The first one is LampedusaInFestival (LIF), a community festival which was held on the island of Lampedusa from 2009 to 2015. In the Italian context, this event represented a unique local attempt to thread a narrative of social inclusion, while condemning Italy's security handling of the Mediterranean "migration crisis". The second case study will be Welcome!, an interdisciplinary event organised at the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration from September to November 2017, which attempted to juxtapose a message of intercultural dialogue and solidarity to the persisting colonial and neo-colonial setting of the Palais de la Porte Dorée, where it was held. While both opposed a complex performance of dissent towards national and European policies, the two events presented different scales and rationales: the festival in Lampedusa was organised on the contained surface of a remote island over three to seven days, and mainly benefitted from the initiative of volunteers, local artists and activists. More importantly, it functioned on a reduced budget, carefully chosen by the organising association Askavusa according to ethical criteria, and was completely free to attend. Conversely, Welcome! was directly sponsored by the MNHI, and therefore by the French state, and had a much larger budget available to organize its rich programme over two months. Nonetheless, most of the featured events were ticketed, with the exception of conference debates and book presentations. In both cases, it is clear that the choice of charging for the admission ticket, or making it free was also determined by the target audience contemplated

by the organisers: in the case of LIF, a wider audience composed of passers-by, tourists, local inhabitants while, in the case of Welcome!, a more selected audience willing to pay to attend the performance. Finally, compared with the reduced space on the Sicilian island, the event in Paris used a large institutional space able to accommodate a wider public and, located in the Eastern periphery of the capital by the *boulevard périphérique*, it was relatively easy to reach from the city centre. All these different choices also affected the resulting image and significance of the two festivals: while LampedusaInFestival remained, in the course of its seven editions, a small-scale independent event, with only selected partnerships with the Italian institutions and a clearly detectable counter-hegemonic tone, the event in Paris oscillated between compliance with the institutional rhetoric on immigration and diversity, and a push towards contesting it through the initiatives included. In this sense, it reproduced the ambiguous stance of the French government which on the one hand is trying to appear more accommodating and welcoming towards refugees, but on the other is maintaining a policy of hostility by asserting the closure of its national borders, closing down spontaneous refugee camps in Paris and Calais on a weekly if not daily basis, toughening its policy towards unauthorized migrants.

Beyond their differences, the interest of analysing these specific case studies, just like the museums in the previous chapter, lies in the fact that both were held in highly contested spaces of signification: in one case, the island which has become the symbol of the migration crisis in the Italian debate; in the other, one of the most controversial museums in today's France. The key feature to keep in mind is indeed the narrative that both events carried out in the public cultural arena: a narrative of openness and welcoming of diversity, with particular reference to the appalling conditions experienced by migrants. An implicit intention to challenge the surrounding pre-existing discourses is well detectable in the symbolic image chosen for the poster. Both in

the case of Welcome! and in that of LIF, this represented an open door (figure 17).



**Figure 17. The posters of Welcome! (left) and LampedusaInFestival (right), both featuring a symbolic open door in support of migrants' rights.**

In the case of Lampedusa, the door portrayed is the monument Porta d'Europa by artist Mimmo Paladino, installed on the island in 2008 to commemorate the thousands of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. In the case of the French festival, an imaginary wooden threshold superimposed to a coastline has just been crossed by a man. These events can indeed be read as open doors against closed borders, which invite to a dialogue among the different stakeholders involved in the migratory phenomenon today.

Differently from previous festival studies, the following pages analyse selected key moments of the two events' programmes, but also transcend the significance of single performances to consider the festival in its entirety as a narrative performed within the ambiguity of a particular space/time nexus. Such narrative will elucidate explicit, as well as implicit, discourses and representations that the festival offers about contemporary migration in the Italian and French public spheres, signalling the efforts made by the organisers to foster solidarity and activism through different strategies of artistic engagement with civil society.

#### 4.2 LampedusaInFestival, or against the Border Spectacle

In the case of public events, as for museums, the Italian landscape often presents small-scale, local and grassroots initiatives rather than centralised events. In fact, despite being scattered around the peninsula, a great number of migration festivals were held over the last ten years in Southern Italy, which was primarily both involved in the reception of migrants and refugees, and affected by innumerable sea tragedies over the last twenty years. This seems to explain why local administrations have felt a more urgent need to respond to the atmosphere of “migratory emergency” by means of cultural events which also tried to foster tourism and a more “positive” public visibility. For example, the cultural initiative Festival Sabir will reach its fifth edition in Palermo in autumn 2018, after being held in Lampedusa, in Syracuse in 2015 and Pozzallo.<sup>29</sup> Sabir Fest, too, retrieved the name “Sabir”, referring to the ancient *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean area, in order to promote cultural dialogue and human rights through public events.<sup>30</sup> However, in the national panorama the case of LIF distinguished itself both for being directly organised by the island’s local community, and for regularly occurring in the very border zone on which the entire national debate on irregular migrations seemed to have recently converged.

Over the last ten years, the reiterated news footages of overcrowded boats approaching its shores have contributed to the public perception of Lampedusa as a Mediterranean island struggling to reconcile its role as “doorway” of Europe with its image of natural

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<sup>29</sup> Festival Sabir, <http://www.festivalsabir.it/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>30</sup> See ‘SabirFest: cultura e cittadinanza Mediterranea’, held over the same month in the two locations of Messina and Catania in Sicily (SabirFest, <http://www.sabirfest.it/> [accessed 10 September 2018]). The reference to the Mediterranean Sabir language also recalls Iain Chambers’s notion of ‘maritime criticism’, in which the Mediterranean in particular, and its cultural connections, are taken as an inspiration for new peaceful co-existences (see Iain Chambers, ‘Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks’, *PMLA*, 125.3 (2010), 678-84).

paradise and tourist attraction. Indeed, as Cuttitta maintained in 2012, echoing De Genova's notion of 'border spectacle', the image of Lampedusa as Europe's ultimate outpost has progressively been constructed from the late 1990s through media representation and political rhetoric, transforming the island into the main stage for a veritable "spectacle" that justifies more restrictive security policies for the management of migratory journeys across the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>31</sup> Lampedusa is in fact often portrayed in mainstream media as an island on the verge of collapse because of the unprecedented arrivals of migrants and refugees from Africa. At the same time, the image of migrants depicted through the rhetoric of security is alternated with a humanitarian discourse depicting migrants as powerless victims,<sup>32</sup> and constructing an imaginary of emergency and invasion in the interest of political movements targeting migrants as social and economic threats.<sup>33</sup> Such a distorted and simplified depiction of contemporary migrations, in addition to feeding collective fear and the rise of xenophobic movements across Europe, also significantly overlooks the plea of migrants and refugees, still prevalently depicted as silent and passive subjects during and after their journeys, when they are not portrayed as lifeless and nameless victims of yet another shipwreck.

Whereas both in De Genova's and Hall's theorizations "spectacle" identifies the risk of a detached contemplation of distant events and exoticized others, aimed at dividing rather than bringing the "viewer" and the "viewed" in communication, when considered in the

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<sup>31</sup> Nicholas De Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and 'Illegality' in Mexican Chicago*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine*; Paolo Cuttitta, 'Borderizing the island setting', 196–219.

<sup>32</sup> Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*.

<sup>33</sup> See Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non Persone: L'Esclusione dei Migranti in una Società Globale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999); Marco Bruno, 'The Journalistic Construction of Emergenza Lampedusa: The Arab Springs and the Landings Issue in Media Representations of Migration', in *Destination Italy: Representing Migration in Contemporary Media and Narrative* ed. by Emma Bond, Guido Bonsaver and Federico Faloppa (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 59–83; Sandro Mezzadra, *Diritto di fuga: migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2001).

context of public events and performing arts this notion suggestively resonates with the positive display of community values which is at the basis of temporary social events. Although LIF has already been the object of several studies,<sup>34</sup> it has still not been investigated from the specific angle of festival studies, and therefore not as a cultural performance as such. Yet, it is precisely from this perspective that the importance of staging the alternative “spectacles” of temporary events at the centre of the *mise en scène* of the border becomes evident.

As Italy’s constructed border *par excellence*, Lampedusa reflects today’s contradictions of Europe’s public attitude, divided between an ambiguous humanitarian approach and a re-emerging reluctance to welcome and protect migrants and refugees reaching its territory. But precisely for its strategic location between Europe and Africa, the island can indeed be considered as a liminal site of negotiation, as one of Europe’s borderscapes, like Ceuta, or Calais, where, in the words of Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, ‘alternatives to dominant landscape of power’ can also be woven.<sup>35</sup> In fact, for its embeddedness in the “migratory crisis” Lampedusa has also become a crucial site for the emergence of new political subjectivities in both the local population and the migrant community, attracting journalists, activists and artists who called for the need to re-consider established perceptions on mobility across the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>36</sup> Against the sensationalistic drift encountered in mainstream mass media, numerous voices urged for alternative gazes on these Mediterranean journeys. If journalists operated towards a more truthful

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<sup>34</sup> See Ilaria Vecchi, ‘The Experience of the Askavusa Association: Migrant Struggle with Cultural Activities’, *Crossings*, 7.2 (2016) 165-79 and Chiara Brambilla, ‘Navigating the Euro/African Border and Migration Nexus through the Borderscapes Lens: Insights from the LampedusaInFestival’, in *Borderscapes: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making*, ed. by Chiara Brambilla and others (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 111-21, (p. 106).

<sup>35</sup> Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (eds.), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxvi.

<sup>36</sup> Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border As Method*.



reporting on the theme of migration - for example through the implementation of the Journalist's Code of Conduct promoted by the Associazione Carta di Roma in Italy <sup>37</sup> - artists and academics have mobilised and advocated in support of alternative perspectives on the plea of displaced individuals, while actively protesting against the widespread violation of migrants' rights in the borderlands of Europe.<sup>38</sup> On their side, local inhabitants urged for a different portrayal of their island, now more often associated with deadly shipwrecks, like the infamous tragedy of 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, in which over 300 refugees lost their lives, or with the images of its poorly-managed CIE (Centre for Identification and Expulsion) for migrants, and less with its natural reserves and traditional lifestyle, which have always made it a popular tourist attraction. Ten years into the progressive construction of Lampedusa as Italy's ultimate frontier, the island remains the site of a constant negotiation between the media's often flattening portrayals, the locals' self-representation and the migrants' struggle for a more ethical visibility of their stories in the public sphere.

If festivals can be considered, in Alessandro Falassi's words, as 'time out of time'<sup>39</sup> for their typical atmosphere of exceptionality, they remain nonetheless deeply rooted in the historical circumstances in which they occur. Typically, more than national or international events, community festivals are grassroots initiatives in support of local causes, epitomising the life of a restricted social group in a moment of

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<sup>37</sup> See Carta di Roma, <http://www.cartadiroma.org/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>38</sup> A representative example of such opposition is the aforementioned Carta di Lampedusa (Charter of Lampedusa), published in 2014 and authored by a collective of activists and researchers, which defends the freedom of movement for migrants and urges institutions to stop migrant detention and refoulement at the EU borders. See [www.lacartadilampedusa.org](http://www.lacartadilampedusa.org) [accessed 10 September 2018]. On the counter-hegemonic narratives emerged in the last decade about Lampedusa, see Federica Mazzara, *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and the Aesthetics of Subversion* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019). See also Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso (eds.), *Border Lampedusa: Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Alessandro Falassi (ed.), *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

transition or of perceived political and social difficulties. This appeared to be precisely the case of LIF in Lampedusa, which represented an act of collective, imaginative rethinking of local priorities in relation to national institutions and transnational movements. In particular, the originality of this event can be analysed according to two respects: firstly, its attempt to contrast the border spectacle on the island, by promoting alternative narrations of contemporary migrations, and its ability to guide a collective reflection among locals, visitors, guests and institutions about the island's role in the Mediterranean area. Secondly, it can be examined with reference to the "migrant's corner", for its effort to involve asylum seekers and migrants in the organization and participation to the event.

Indeed, the first noticeable feature of this yearly event was its varied, but consistent, programming during its seven editions, which a unique interdisciplinary vitality. LIF was organised by the local collective Askavusa<sup>40</sup> (meaning barefoot woman in the local dialect<sup>41</sup>), a cultural association of activists and artists founded in 2009 to promote social initiatives on the island, with particular reference to the mediatized Mediterranean "emergency". 2009 was also the year of the initiative's first edition, defined by the organizers as a 'small festival of community, migrations, struggles, responsible tourism and sea stories'. Since then, seven editions were successfully held either in July or in September for three to seven days, on different sites on the island.<sup>42</sup>

Combining a strong presence of films screenings (particularly documentaries) with numerous debates, music concerts, theatre and dance performances and art exhibitions, the different editions received the attention of national media and of the Italian and foreign public.

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<sup>40</sup> See the association's website: <https://askavusa.wordpress.com/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>41</sup> Federica Mazzara, 'Spaces of Visibility for the Migrants of Lampedusa: The Counter Narrative of the Aesthetic Discourse', *Italian Studies*, 70.4 (2015), 449-64 and 'Subverting the Narrative of the Lampedusa Borderscape', *Crossings*, 7.2 (2016), 135-47.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.lampedusainfestival.com/> [accessed 4 December 2016].

LIF was also awarded the Medaglia d'Onore by the Italian President twice, in 2011 and in 2012, for its promotion of cultural dialogue, active solidarity and the discussion of common horizons: peace and reconciliation, an ethics of hybridity and a shared fight against inequality, human exploitation and the militarization of borders.<sup>43</sup> The festival also featured the awarding of prizes for the best short film or documentary according to different sections: journeys of migration, traditional storytelling, democracy, memory.<sup>44</sup> This award progressively gained national and international resonance: in the third edition, for instance, 150 films were sent to the awarding committee for consideration, mostly from Italy but also from Russia, Spain and France. Experts on mobility and human rights, artists and journalists were invited in the course of the different editions to share their expertise and create a wider awareness of the complexity of migration in the Mediterranean today, thus transforming the island into a lively cultural stage from which to 'analyse, decode and understand global phenomena'.<sup>45</sup> A multi-faceted perspective on migration was indeed reflected in the discussion of displacement not as an isolated social fact but as inextricably linked to wider global dynamics. For this reason, some of the films and events during the different editions also focused on environmentalism, unemployment, the problem of access to culture and the right to health, so as to underline that importance of considering migration in its connections to a complex set of historical circumstances.

In the organization of such variety of events, from the very first edition a major concern for the association was to avoid external, top-down funding: if LIF was initially supported by the national association ARCI, Askavusa soon separated from it because of ARCI's tight

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> See the different calls for submissions of the past editions on the website <http://www.lampedusainfestival.com/> [accessed 4 December 2016].

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.lampedusainfestival.com/lampedusainfestival2012/bando2012.html> [accessed 4 December 2016].

connection to centre-left parties and strived to remain as autonomous as possible in terms of sponsorship.<sup>46</sup> To cover part of the expenses, Askavusa affiliated with the Rete del Caffè Sospeso, a peer support for independent festivals and associations, most of which are located in southern Italy.<sup>47</sup> This collaboration tightened the festival's connection with similar initiatives about human rights, such as the Film Festival of Human Rights in Naples, and also initiated the coordination and exchange between different activist networks on the national territory. The remaining budget was obtained by small independent sponsors, such as local businesses and by recruiting volunteers and accepting donations through crowdfunding. For example, in 2013 affiliated members and collaborators of the association launched funding campaigns in cities as different as Tunis, Berlin, London. Finally, another strategy to filter their sponsors was Askavusa's campaign to contrast corruption by making all sponsors formally declare that they do not comply with mafia extortions and they do not pay to receive protection (*pizzo*), in accordance with national and regional initiatives. All these efforts contributed to preserving a consistent image of autonomy from mainstream political rhetoric over the seven editions and consolidating the community's own narrative of dissent towards the distorted image of Lampedusa frequently brought forward in the public sphere.

Such an attempt to oppose the 'border spectacle' can also be detected in the showcase of local identity during the initiative. In fact, one of the festival's main aims remained the promotion of social cohesion among the locals, encouraging a welcoming attitude towards migrants. This translated into the public condemnation of the actions of a minority of local inhabitants who repeatedly manifested hostility towards the permanence of migrants on the island, as in the case of the

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<sup>46</sup> Vecchi, 'The Experience of the Askavusa Association', p. 170.

<sup>47</sup> See the network's website: <http://www.retedelcaffesospeso.com/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

attacks on migrants that occurred on the island in 2011.<sup>48</sup> The scapegoating of migrants resulted, in fact, from the combination of Lampedusa's role as first port of call for the landings of migrant boats and the pre-existing economic and administrative struggles, such as the lack of a hospital, the scarcity of cultural infrastructures on the island, and its poor maritime connection to Sicily and mainland Italy throughout the year, all of which tended to generate a widespread sense of abandonment and frustration in the inhabitants. On an island without public libraries and without cinemas, LIF created an opportunity for local inhabitants to get together to promote social awareness and values of tolerance and respect.

A deeply emblematic case of the way in which the festival advanced new visions for Lampedusa and the Mediterranean was represented by the event on the fourth day of the fifth edition. In this meeting entitled 'Musiche, migrazioni, mondi: verso un nuovo senso del Mediterraneo', invited guest Iain Chambers engaged the audience in a debate on Mediterranean identity, a topic which he extensively developed in his publications.<sup>49</sup> Accompanied by the voice and guitar of Giacomo Sferlazzo, a founding member of Askavusa, this event merged academic thought and local creativity to stress the need to adopt a more inclusive and flexible attitude to the notions of identity and community, precisely by legitimising human movement as a precious chance to expand restrictive ideas of nationhood. Chambers's concept of 'maritime criticism'<sup>50</sup> – a fluid approach to belonging and borders which strongly opposes the security drift of Fortress Europe – appeared deeply empowered by being pronounced within such an exceptional setting. Indeed, the choice of holding this meeting on the beach opposite the Isola dei Conigli – a beautiful shore part of a

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<sup>48</sup> See Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine*, p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> See in particular Iain Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities* (London, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017) and Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*.

<sup>50</sup> Iain Chambers, 'Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks', p. 180.

protected natural area – strengthened the call for a new vision of Lampedusa not as the site of migratory emergency, but as a haven for human encounter and solidarity between locals, migrants, guests and participants (figure 18).<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the atmosphere of heightened celebration conveyed by this moment of the festival truly appeared to suspend the typical alarmistic images of the island provided in the mass media.

Beside this specific case, the other numerous public events allowed the festival to become a platform to re-affirm a political stance of solidarity with migrants, but also offered new modes of experiencing the island both for locals and for visitors, far from the tones of emergency but also far from a mentality of touristic consumption and homogenization of the territory within the tourist circuit. Indeed, by organizing performances and debates in different areas of the small island, the initiative offered a chance to explore the uniqueness of the landscape and the place's remoteness and natural beauty. This small-scale interaction between the participants, typical feature of a community festival, offered the opportunity for a dialogue between visitors and locals in a festive event distant from the alarmistic tones narrated by media. It was also the very closeness to the spectacle of the border that gave the festival a privileged viewpoint in the Mediterranean area, creating a subversive contrast with the island's staged exceptionality in the middle of a migration emergency. If festivals can become essential for questioning the dynamics of power at play between the stakeholders of the local context where it takes place, as Jepson and Clarke observed, the anti-sensational spectacle of community values, through the performance of cultural activities, truly offered a chance to consider alternative narrations of time and space on

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<sup>51</sup> See also Celeste Ianniciello, 'Lampedusa In Festival': The Encounter with the Other', *Roots & Routes*, 12 (2013), <http://www.roots-routes.org/liquid-bordersil-museo-della-memoria-del-mare-oggetti-testimoniali-sulla-soglia-liquida-del-mediterraneodi-anna-chiara-cimoli-2/> [accessed 20 July 2018].

the island, in opposition to a dominant narrative of threat and divisiveness.



**Figure 18.** The event held by Iain Chambers and Giacomo Sferlazzo at LIF, during which the ‘spectacle of the border’ appeared to be temporarily suspended (© Alessia Capasso).

Beyond the aim of advancing an alternative portrayal of Lampedusa, the second crucial characteristic of the festival was the attempt to actively involve of the migrant community residing in Italy or abroad in the programme of activities. Since Lampedusa is primarily a site of transit for displaced individuals, few are the migrants who remain on the island, and those who do are generally detained in the CIE, prevented from interacting with local inhabitants. For this reason, one of the priorities of Askavusa was the invitation of migrant artists to contribute with their views and experiences to the festival’s discourse. One example was the invitation of the members of migrant networks such as ‘Lampedusa in Hamburg’ which advocates for the rights of asylum seekers and migrant workers in Germany and throughout

Europe.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the collaboration with migrants represented an essential part of the Askavusa's activity from its origins, enabling the festival to become a gathering of migrants, experts and activists in an atmosphere of cooperation and advocacy, highlighting the need to tackle the phenomenon of migration through an approach of dialogue between all its stakeholders. In this sense, a most emblematic example showing the intention to involve the protagonists and the witnesses of contemporary migrations was the regular participation of Ethiopian filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer to the initiative between 2010 and 2013.

In 2006, Yimer crossed the Mediterranean after being detained in Libya, and arrived in Lampedusa, where it was held in the detention centre for a few days before being transferred to central Italy to await the processing of his asylum application. His migratory journey was already included in the documentary *Come un uomo sulla terra* (2008), co-directed by Andrea Segre. Then, from 2008 Yimer trained as a filmmaker at Archivio Memorie Migranti in Rome, and in 2010 he directed the documentary *Soltanto il mare* with Giulio Cederna, and Fabrizio Barraco in 2010. This film centred on his experience of transit via Lampedusa as an asylum seeker, and on his subsequent return to the island. While in the CIE any contact with local citizens was prevented, his return to Lampedusa enabled him to meet its inhabitants and initiate a dialogue with them. Most of the documentary features his interviews to the islanders, but also portrays the director's personal re-experiencing of the place after receiving international protection. A central point in the film's narrative is precisely the representational gap between the media portrayal of Lampedusa and his later individual impressions as a refugee filmmaker (figure 19).

The choice of involving Yimer in the festival's organization made his personal itinerary and artistic production become symbolic of the initiative's aims: to go beyond the sensational narratives of invasion and

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<sup>52</sup> Vecchi, 'The Experience of Askavusa Association', p. 172.



threat, to re-discover a more human and solidary dimension of interaction between migrants, asylum seekers and their host society. In fact, in the 2011 edition the filmmaker was also part of the festival's jury, and curated the section 'Approdo e Speranza', a section aimed at giving visibility to stories about hope and positive experiences of foreigners living in Italy.<sup>53</sup> Other members of the jury were Algerian writer Amara Lakhous, Senegalese sociologist Ali Baba Faye (both residing in Italy), Italian filmmaker Gianfranco Rosi (who would direct the famous *Fuocoammare* in 2016) and Antonio Morana, a representative of Lampedusa's port authorities.<sup>54</sup> The direct involvement of migrant artists made it possible to achieve a shared narrative of contemporary migration, in which they played the essential role of moderators and curators for the different sections of film awards and public screenings. This was indeed one of the major ways in which the event tried to challenge the "migrant's corner" frequently occupied by the protagonists of Mediterranean crossings.

Of course, Yimer's involvement was a particularly successful case of participation to the construction of a festival narrative together with migrants. At a more general level, the direct involvement of migrants remained somehow scarce, especially after the interruption of the partnership with AMM (Archivio Memorie Migranti) for political reasons.<sup>55</sup> While more effective strategies for creating shared narratives between the local and migrant community still needed to be developed, LIF demonstrated that the collaboration with the protagonists and witnesses of contemporary migrations represented a crucial and ethical step in the portrayal of mobility from the perspective of all its stakeholders. Entrusting the representation, both verbal and visual, of

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<sup>53</sup> [www.lampedusainfestival.com](http://www.lampedusainfestival.com) [accessed 4 December 2016].

<sup>54</sup> Another notable guest was Zakaria Mohamad Ali, a Somali journalist, refugee in Italy since 2008. See his contribution in Zakaria Mohamad Ali, Dagmawi Yimer, Mahamed Aman and Gabriella Ghermandi, 'Tales of Journeys', *Crossings*, 7.2, (2016), 227-243.

<sup>55</sup> Vecchi, p. 173.

the current Mediterranean events to the subjects directly affected by migration became an actual political standpoint in support of a more authentic and inclusive gaze onto these precarious migratory journeys.



**Figure 19.** Dagmawi Yimer back in Lampedusa to film his documentary *Soltanto il mare*, a homage to Lampedusa and its tradition of hospitality, in contrast with the politics of the ‘border spectacle’ (© Archivio delle Memorie Migranti).

Festivals certainly represent a moment of heightened celebration of community values and cultural dialogue but, as previously observed, both their strength and their weakness reside in their temporality. Concentrating the efforts of a year-long organization in a few days can become challenging precisely because of the delicate balance between the atmosphere of exceptionality during the event and the “normality” of the rest of the year. Such seemed to be also the challenge experienced by LIF, which becomes representative of the major issues faced by a community festival caught in a tension between rootedness in the local territory and independent sponsorship on the one hand, and the necessity to evolve into a more visible and permanent cultural reality on the other. Therefore, it is worth discussing the developments and issues recently faced by Askavusa, which brought first to a phase of

uncertainty, then to the cancellation of the 2016 edition and the end of the initiative.

Between 2014 and 2015, during the association's meetings and in the debates with experts and other cultural organizations, a new format was elaborated for the festival. In response to the perceived need to offer a more permanent presence throughout the year, Askavusa decided to divert some of the energies devoted to the temporary event towards the project of an anti-institutional museum, called Porto M, which became the headquarters of the association's activities. Located by Lampedusa's harbour, this small space gathers and artistically displays everyday objects belonging to migrants and recovered from the local dump.<sup>56</sup> Opened all year round, Porto M has indeed become a veritable point of reference for the many researchers, activists and journalists working on Mediterranean migration and visiting the island, and has been used to host a number of cultural initiatives in different moments of the year, such as concerts, film screenings, public debates, aimed at maintaining a social ferment outside of the festival experience. Porto M anticipated other institutional initiatives dedicated to migration on the island, such as the new-born Museo della Fiducia e del Dialogo, inaugurated only in 2016 next to the island council.<sup>57</sup> As the first initiatives of their kind on the island, both LIF and Porto M actually functioned as forerunners for later projects, also setting the pace for an active involvement of the local community in future cultural events.

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<sup>56</sup> Porto M, <https://askavusa.wordpress.com/con-gli-oggetti/porto-m/> [accessed 10 September 2018]. See Federica Mazzara, 'Objects, Debris and Memory of the Mediterranean Passage: Porto M in Lampedusa', in *Border Lampedusa: Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land*, ed. by Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 153-73.

<sup>57</sup> This museum aims at hosting international artwork that promote human rights and cultural dialogue, in addition to organising learning courses for schools on the topic of asylum, (Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, 'Lampedusa: Verso il museo della fiducia e del dialogo per il Mediterraneo', <http://musei.beniculturali.it/progetti/lampedusa-verso-il-museo-della-fiducia-e-del-dialogo-per-il-mediterraneo> [accessed 10 September 2018]).

Such an attempt to spread the activities of the festival throughout the year rather than in few days seemed to respond to the need to maintain both a constant opportunity of interaction between the locals and the interest of visitors towards the theme of migration. As one of Askavusa's founding members claimed in July 2015, from that year 'the festival would be different, it would happen all year round'.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the collective re-thought the usual programming of LampedusaInFestival and suspended the awarding of prizes to the films screened during the event. Thus, it decided to 'abandon the logic of competition, of juries and awards' and to work on 'paths of sharing, knowledge and dialogue during the whole year'<sup>59</sup>. These two major changes compared to previous versions suggested a move towards a more fluid conceptualization of the festival, no longer a dense concentration of events and guests in the exceptionality of a one-off circumstance but a more frequent gathering of individuals concerned by similar social issues. More precisely, its evolution from a yearly festival into more regular events spread out across the rest of the year appeared as a strategic solution in the context of an island that sees a considerable presence of visitors during the summer but is somehow "forgotten" during the other seasons. In this sense, the opening of Porto M also seemed to complement the punctual occurrence of the festival with a dimension of normality and everyday life in which to interact with visitors and local citizens throughout the year.

However, the changes affecting the very structure of the event also seemed the first steps towards a radical re-thinking of the festival as a means of raising awareness about the reality of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean area. In 2016, the festival was cancelled due to unforeseen events.<sup>60</sup> Apart from that year's specific circumstances, the

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<sup>58</sup> From a personal conversation with Giacomo Sferlazzo in Lampedusa on 3 July 2015.

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.lampedusainfestival.com/> [accessed 4 December 2016].

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.lampedusainfestival.com/component/content/article/46-documenti/214-comunicato-annullamento-ottava-edizione-2016.html> [accessed 4 December 2016].

decision not to organize the festival appeared to be linked to a perceived impasse, on the part of the organizers, regarding the possibility of further developing their socio-political agenda through such a format. One of the main difficulties seemed to be that of coordinating with local and national realities and the struggle to compromise with other associations and sponsors, like in the case of their former collaboration with AMM, which promotes the artistic development of migrants residing in Italy, because of their political funding. The decision to suspend the yearly festival, therefore, seemed to reveal a desire and a need to re-consider the role of the initiative in the context of the island, but also showed the difficulty of the festival to contrast the exhaustion of its usual formula and to renew itself to appeal to its public. This also seems explained by the emergence of new, more focused experimentations with specific artistic languages, such as theatre workshops and traditional puppet shows (the Sicilian *opera dei pupi*) conducted by single members of the collective.

While the difficulty of sustaining such an independent initiative through intermitting and selected funding certainly affected the continuation of the festival, the major causes seemed to be a sense of discouragement and frustration in the association members due to the protracted inefficiency of national policies to prevent further sea tragedies, which also propelled internal conflicts within the collective regarding the coordination with other political and social realities such as the NGOs operating around the island. If, on the one hand, these problems suggested a struggle to find new modes of expression for a militant voice against a Europe of borders, on the other they also underlined the ability of Askavusa to constantly question its own identity, its role and its features, in a desire to respond to different cultural moments and exigencies, leaving its range of activities and expressions constantly open to reconsideration.

By looking at festivals as the ultimate “spectacle” of community, in which a social group shares its values among internal members and

external visitors, the concepts of exceptionality and display become powerful tools rather than nullifying mechanisms of representation. Indeed, as Tascón has observed, planned cultural events do have the potential to generate empathy and solidarity, but also to revive the public interest towards specific social issues and strengthen human connections among its participants.<sup>61</sup> Community festivals are particularly emblematic in this sense, since they directly originate within the local community with the aim of celebrating and promoting its image and traditions.<sup>62</sup> In Lampedusa, staging a planned cultural event in the middle of contested representations or difficult identity negotiations channelled the dissenting voice of the local community with that of the visitors assembled for the festival, decisively developing a new awareness in the group and reversing established media spectacles into narratives against the rhetoric of security. In the course of seven editions, the festival seemed to effectively become a temporary bridge between, in Chiara Brambilla's words, the 'politics and the aesthetics of the borderscape',<sup>63</sup> elaborated by the combined voices of artists, locals and participants which transformed the event into a performance of collective activism for human rights. Despite its limitations, such a collective opposition to the *mise en scène* of the border ultimately allowed local and migrant communities to transform themselves, for the duration of the festival, into power stakeholders performing alternative self-representations, leaving the "corner" of the public sphere to perform a deeply symbolic moment of occupation and re-appropriation of the island.

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<sup>61</sup> Tascón, *Human Rights Film Festivals*, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Jepson and Clarke have defined community festivals as 'themed and inclusive community event or series of events which have been created as the result of an inclusive community planning process to celebrate the particular way of life of people and groups in the local community with emphasis on particular space and time', Jepson and Clarke, 'Events and Community Development', in *Research Themes for Events*, ed. by Rebecca Finkel and others (Wallingford: CABI International, 2013), pp. 6-16, (p. 8).

<sup>63</sup> Brambilla, 'Navigating the Euro/African Border', p. 106.

### 4.3 Welcome!, or against the Spectacle of the “Other”

Different but equally complex dynamics are at play in the case of the Paris-based festival Welcome!. Despite the diffusion of numerous networks of associations and activist groups in support of migrants' rights, there is in fact no equivalent to the festival in Lampedusa on the French territory. Indeed, the fact that migration, especially of the illegal kind, is veritably seen as a matter of 'public order' by local and national administrations is also suggested by this scarcity of public cultural events addressing the migratory situation in contested areas such as Calais, precisely where it would be more necessary to mobilize citizens. As the protracted situations of 'humanitarian emergency' both in Calais and at the border with Italy in Ventimiglia illustrate, the main political position adopted by the French government was in fact to ignore the drift of human rights at its own national borders, leaving NGOs and volunteers to assist those undocumented individuals trapped in a bureaucratic limbo. The French government has indeed shown hostility towards the migrants in Calais on repeated occasions, as the widespread episodes of police violence and abuses documented by Human Rights Watch testify, and this climate of social tension also seemed to discourage the creation of cultural events.<sup>64</sup> Compared to the Italian one, the French context presents a much more centripetal situation as far as migration festivals are concerned. If in the border-zones political dissent has indeed converged into numerous public demonstrations on the part of migrants, refugees and EU citizens over the last decade, most efforts of the associations seem concentrated rather in the capital city, around institutional places like cultural centres and museums, such as in the case of Welcome!.

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<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'France: Inquiry Finds Police Abused Migrants in Calais', 24 October 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/24/france-inquiry-finds-police-abused-migrants-calais> [accessed 10 September 2018].

This one-off festival was organised by the museum curators at the Palais de la Porte Dorée from September to November 2017 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the opening of the MNHI and included a variety of events throughout different locations inside and around the same building which was the object of the previous chapter. As it can be read in the presentation statement on the website, the festival revolved around a re-evaluation of the concept of hospitality in contemporary France through the contribution of artists, performers and intellectuals. The aim of the event was in fact to promote an invitation to solidarity towards migrants across Europe, with the priority of inviting the audiences to change their views on contemporary mobility, abandoning stereotypes and fighting collective fears towards the migrant as “other”. In order to attract different kinds of audiences, the festival included a wide array of film screenings, art exhibitions, music concerts, public debates and book presentations.<sup>65</sup> Among its significant events was the presentation of *Ce qu’ils font est juste*, a collection of short stories authored by several prominent authors such as Fatou Diome, Fabienne Kanor, Philippe Claudel, which, starting with its title, expressed a defence of those Europeans helping migrants cross EU borders and apply for asylum, and who therefore become prosecutable for the so-called “solidarity crimes”.<sup>66</sup> Other events, such as the day-long film screening of *Jungle Stories*, a collection of documentaries on the refugee camp in Calais, or the theatre

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<sup>65</sup> <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/agenda/2017-08/welcome> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>66</sup> See Béatrice Vallaëys (ed.), *Ce qu’ils font est juste: ils mettent la solidarité et l’hospitalité à l’honneur* (Paris: Don Quichotte, 2017). Regarding “solidarity crimes”, see chapter 2, with reference to the films *Welcome* and *Terraferma*. Together with the volume edited by Vallaëys, other recent examples of collaborative texts in support of migrants and refugees were published, such as the collection *Osons la fraternité! Les écrivains aux côtés des migrants* edited by Patrick Chamoiseau and Michel Le Bris (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2018), which originated from the ‘Déclaration de Saint-Malo’ for the right to move, a text drafted by Chamoiseau, Le Bris and Mireille Delmas-Marty on the occasion of the festival Étonnants Voyageurs in Saint-Malo in 2018 (see <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/le-billet-culturel/le-billet-culturel-du-lundi-21-mai-2018> and the festival’s website <https://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com> [accessed 10 January 2019]).



performance *Sous le pont*, based on the 2016 text by French-Syrian artist Abdulrahman Khallouf,<sup>67</sup> directly put the situation at French borders under the spotlight, clearly denouncing police abuses and human rights violations. At least temporarily, these events included the essential stories of border struggles within the institutional space of the museum, from which they were so far absent or marginal, expanding its narrative's signification and making it 'other' from its usual, more conservative tone. The silences of the museum and building narrative, the 'never-said', in a Foucauldian sense,<sup>68</sup> were brought to the surface by the subversive timeliness of these events, which attempted to make up for those missing fragments in the permanent collection.

Indeed, besides its importance as a rich and diverse cultural event, the distinctive feature of Welcome! in the French panorama remained its being hosted in a highly contested space of signification: this time not of the 'border spectacle', like in the case of Lampedusa, but that of the 'spectacle of the Other'. As discussed in the previous chapter, because of its original colonial structure the Palais de la Porte Dorée still constitutes a triumphal celebration of France as a colonizing empire. In fact, the discourse promoted by the building still seems to relegate not only the colonized, but also non-French individuals, among whom immigrants, to the figure of exoticized 'Others' in relation to the myth of the universalizing values of French citizenship. Stuart Hall's reflections on how difference is made "other" by means of visual and verbal spectacularization are useful to this regard not only to address the racial and ethnic labelling of colonized subjects conveyed by the frescoes of the main hall, but also to investigate how the museum narrative categorises migrants too as visibly non-French individuals, exposed in a similar fashion as the exotic figures represented in the Salle

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<sup>67</sup> <https://fab.festivalbordeaux.com/fr/spectaclefab/sous-le-pont/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1972).

des Fêtes. In addition to ethnic and racial discrimination, the migrant subjects represented in the permanent collection also appear to be marginalised on the basis of their 'illegal' status on EU territory, with citizenship rights functioning as a new, powerfully discriminating element.<sup>69</sup> It was precisely this 'spectacularized otherness', together with the underrepresentation, when not absence, of the migrants' agency in the institutional narrative of the museum that seemed to come to a halt during some of the events in Welcome!: when the floor was left to migrants, artists and activists, a markedly more inclusive narrative appeared to be woven in the building, which called for a reconsideration and update of its permanent institutional discourse.

Festivals can indeed be considered, in the light of event studies, as collective performances providing an insight into the discourses of the different stakeholders involved in, or affected by, the politics of contemporary migration to France. In the performing of these 'agonistic' forces,<sup>70</sup> hegemonic and counter-hegemonic stances were brought together for the audience. Two emblematic cases in this sense are the visual aspects of Amre Sawah's theatre adaptation of Abdulrahman Khallouf's *Sous le pont*, and the performative nature of Bab Badalov's artwork concerning the use of language.

Based on the real-life experiences of different asylum seekers in France, *Sous le pont* relates the hardship experienced by a Syrian refugee, interpreted by Homam Afaara, who lives under a bridge in a French city. In a series of interactions with passers-by, other homeless people, and flashbacks, this critically acclaimed play produced by the Festival International des Arts de Bordeaux Métropole invited the audience to reflect on the future of the protagonist and denounced the complex, extenuating and often arbitrary process experienced by asylum seekers to receive international protection in EU countries.

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<sup>69</sup> Hall, 'The Spectacle of the Other', p. 225.

<sup>70</sup> See Mouffe, 'Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?', p. 157.

Beyond the ability of the director and the actors to emotionally involve the audience in both with tragic and comic moments, the importance of this play resided in the added value of the location chosen for the performance. Indeed, the play was staged in the Salle des Fêtes, precisely against those very problematic frescoes that I addressed in chapter 4 (figure 20).

The result of such juxtaposition, similar to the parking of the smugglers' truck for the performance of *Ticket* right in front of the grand façade of the building, albeit probably less deliberate, generated a powerful contrast between the urgency of the “now”, visually represented by the marginalization and violations experienced by a struggling homeless refugee in the foreground of the stage, and the historical “then” of France’s colonial domination over four continents in the background. Doing justice to the contemporary stories of migrants “othered” by society in the very building in which the subaltern condition of the stereotyped other is still so visible appeared to subvert the representational power dynamics at MNHI, at least for the duration of the event. As with the temporary disruption in the narrative generated by the exhibition ‘Frontières’ in 2016, the centrifugal attempts to abandon the monolithic structure of the museum by means of these dissenting “texts” became evident, calling for a focus on migrant experiences no longer as exceptional, different Others, but as an effective and integral part of contemporary European community.



**Figure 20. *Sous le pont* staged in front of Pierre-Henri Ducos de la Haille's colonial frescoes in the Salle des Fêtes at Palais de la Porte Dorée (© MNHI).**

While *Sous le pont* challenged the colonial setting of the Salle des Fêtes by means of a visual juxtaposition, Babi Badalov's exhibition 'Réfugiés politiques, réfugiés poétiques' hosted during Welcome! combined visual with linguistic elements to de-construct the museum's message. The Azerbaijan-born migrant artist is in fact famous for his poetic use of language in the form of slogans and fragments that play on words' ambiguity, assonance, spelling and translation. An emblematic example was the hanging of the slogan 'Refugees will come', painted on a white canvas, above one of the salle's main doors (figure 21). The artist here transformed the popular phrase 'Refugees welcome', used globally to express solidarity with the plea of displaced people, into a sarcastic statement that affirms how, despite the restrictions imposed on human movement across borders, refugees will inevitably keep attempting their risky journey towards safer and more stable countries. By investigating 'the limits of language and the borders it imposes upon

its users',<sup>71</sup> Badalov follows the mutations of a language that, through visual poetry, migrates from one linguistic code to another, stretching and questioning the power of expression. Such expressive game can thus be read as an attempt to expose the polysemy of public and individual communication, and its ensuing paradoxes. For this reason, this art installation particularly resonated with a context such as the MNHI: superimposing and "writing on" the walls of the Salle des Fêtes, just above the images portraying the exploitation of colonised people by the French Empire constituted a powerful performance of dissent towards the original content of the building, and an exposure of its irreconcilable contrast with the pressing situation of refugee rights across France and Europe.



**Figure 21. 'Refugees will come' by Babi Badalov superimposed on the wall of the Salle des Fêtes for the exhibition 'Réfugiés politiques, réfugiés poétiques' (© MNHI).**

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<sup>71</sup> See Babi Badalov's personal website <https://babibadalov.com/drawings-visual-poetry/> [accessed 10 September 2018].

The message of *Sous le pont* and 'Réfugiés politiques, réfugiés poétiques' was echoed by several other events during the festival. For instance, another noteworthy attempt to reverse the colonial narratives of the palais was the experiment of forum theatre *Actions*, directed by Nicolas Cilins, Yan Duyvendak and Nataly Sugnaux, conceived as an ideal gathering of people in the same place to discuss migration issues.<sup>72</sup> Produced by the company Dreams Come True (Geneva), and hosted once again at the centre of the Salle des Fêtes, it constituted a collective performance of dialogue, facilitated by refugees, migrants and actors, which gave the chance to present and debate opposite political positions among the participants to imagine possible future solutions for the community. Albeit with different priorities and expressive tools, all these artistic performances targeted and interacted with the setting in which they took place. As John McGrath observed in 1981, in any performance 'there are elements which are often more decisive, more central to one's experience of the event than the text or the production',<sup>73</sup> among which the setting is certainly prominent, as an element of innovation or adaptation. In the above cases, the Palais de la Porte Dorée effectively functioned not as a neutral background, but as a peritext which, far from being secondary to the general message of the artwork, augmented the subversive quality of these initiatives. By means of juxtaposition, contrast and contradiction, these events all seemed to signal that a conversation between artists, institutions and public has commenced, if only through the code of artistic performances.

Despite the festival's attempt to mar the outdated narratives of MNHI, as I have discussed in the previous chapter the most problematic

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<sup>72</sup> <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/agenda/2017-08/actions> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>73</sup> John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1996 [1981]), p. 7, cited in Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 58.

aspect of the permanent displays remains that the layers of meaning conveyed by the space are still visibly hierarchical. Notwithstanding the counter-hegemonic potential of cultural performances that denounce the critical *status quo* of French migration politics, its institutional rhetoric remains unvaried in the background. How far can the subversive push of such a festival as Welcome! take the performers and the audience, when the top-down, centralised narrative of the building preserves its original message over the years? If the glory of colonising France seemed powerfully overshadowed by the predicament of the Syrian refugee in *Sous le pont*, in a contrast which can be seen as performance art itself, the same cannot be said for other events during the festival, when the contrast was not so marked. For example, during the music concert of Jordi Savall's ensemble Orpheus XXI with migrant and refugee musicians on the festival's closing night, the frescoes in the background appeared indeed enhanced by the scenic lights illuminating the stage (figure 22). Such juxtaposition between the foreground and the background did not produce any contrasting effect, but this time appeared almost neutral, missing the chance to question the original aim of the images on the frescoes. The problematic aspects of the *palais* and its permanent collection, therefore, persisted despite the festival, not only because the challenge to the colonial context was only partially in the organisers' agendas, but, most importantly, because the very temporary nature of the event did not allow for a more durable impact on the building's overall message. Even if the colonial discourse was temporarily challenged or suspended, it was only a matter of time before the hall was empty again, with the frescoes as the only undisturbed narrations.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See figures 9 and 10 in chapter 3.



**Figure 22. The conclusion of the concert by Orpheus XXI with Jordi Savall, performed in front of the problematic fresco representing France bringing peace and civilization across the continents (© MNHI).**

Was a counter-hegemonic performance realised then, or did it remain just potential? Can it be said that the ‘spectacle of the “Other”’ emerging from the building appeared effectively re-dimensioned by the staging of a “dissenting” festival in the same space? Unfortunately, in a public space where the presence of the other as exotic, subjected individual remains so visible, the “welcoming” message of a temporary event only seemed to scratch the surface of the overall significance of the institutional building. At the same time, it also seems necessary to stress, with Mouffe, that a place truly becomes a public space when the stakeholders’ agendas can be expressed in all their social tension ‘without any possibility of final reconciliation’.<sup>75</sup> In the light of this statement, the constant ambivalence emerging from the text and the context of Welcome! is perhaps not to be considered a flaw, but an inevitable and indeed constitutive element of this public space in the

<sup>75</sup> Mouffe, ‘Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?’, p. 158.



present historical circumstances. In the case of the *palais* in Paris, this festival represented a counter-narrative of hospitality which, albeit precarious and certainly temporary, became part of the institutional text of the museum. Thus, the distinctive feature of this festival lay precisely in its nature of collective performance which symbolically displayed the conflict between the institutional narrative and the activist defence of migrants' rights for the audience, this time in an atmosphere of competitive dialogue and effervescence.

Despite the inevitable difficulty of staging such an event at Palais de la Porte Dorée, the importance of this festival remains well summarised in its name: 'Welcome!' with an exclamation mark. Indeed, the decision to call the event thus suggested the desire, on the part of the organisers, to reiterate the welcoming attitude shown over the decades by a part of the French and European population towards migrants and refugees. The festival put forward a radical stance towards solidarity with migrants: from its title, which strongly re-affirms a desire to engage with today's migrant struggles, and from its programming, it is evident that the intention was to state a clear dissent towards French migration policies. This "welcome" was not the sarcastic and hypocritical invitation denounced in Lioret's film, which, as observed in chapter 2, referred to the protagonist's *bien pensant* neighbour who reports him to the police. On this occasion, "welcome" truly seemed to respond to the need to underline a positive reception of people on the move across EU borders, especially in a moment of institutional hostility towards them.<sup>76</sup> This festival ultimately represented a performative function of solidarity: in contrast with its social context, and with the political choices of the majority of French citizens, it exploited the exceptionality

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<sup>76</sup> In this sense, the festival's name also echoed that of the several campaigns called "Refugees Welcome" (see [refugeeswelcome.org](http://refugeeswelcome.org) and <https://www.refugeesarewelcome.org> [accessed 10 September 2018]) which coordinate local and international associations to provide legal and housing assistance to refugees and migrants and which voiced the dissent of numerous citizens and organizations towards the restrictive immigration policies adopted worldwide over the last decades.

of the festival format to affirm the normality of migration against the 'spectacle of the Other', thus conveying a strong centrifugal force away from the main message of the museum space. For its duration, the event seemed to bring "fresh air" into the museum narrative, questioning pre-existing discourses and challenging the institution to update its public message.

#### **4.4 Migration Festivals: 'Agonistic' Spectacles in the Public Space**

At a time when transnational movement across the Mediterranean area and Europe, like all contemporary social phenomena, is not only inevitably represented in the media, but also often deliberately hyper-mediatized to generate a sense of threat and alarm in EU citizens, contemporary festivals appear in a favourable position to provide that 'political market place' from which dissenting voices towards immigration policies can be collectively expressed. In this chapter, I have highlighted that, because of their ability to gather members of society in a festive atmosphere, migration festivals can be regarded as crucial moments of interactions between different political agents such as national and local institutions, activists and art practitioners, attending public and individuals directly affected by migration. Through these events, migration is no longer associated with the idea of spectacle in a negative sense, as suggested by De Genova and Hall, but becomes a creative and positive re-evaluation of this notion through the arts, by which it contributes to consolidate community links and notions of solidarity and hospitality towards migrants and refugees.

Migration festivals also appear essential to showcase a celebration of engaged contemporary culture by means of film screenings, exhibitions and performances which, by exploiting the atmosphere of exceptionality of the temporary event, help bring the

discussion on human rights abuses from the corner to the centre of the public space. This appeared particularly the case when such festivals were organised in sites that, both on a factual and symbolic level, have become the stage of stereotyped representations of displaced people, such as in the case of the island of Lampedusa and the Palais de la Porte Dorée. Indeed, at a historical moment in which both Italian and French societies appear torn between welcoming and rejecting undocumented individuals, the two festivals analysed were held in contested spaces of representation, in which the ‘agonistic’ forces of institutions, associations and citizens with conflicting agendas became particularly evident. Both events, in fact, attempted to “re-write” the narrative of the public space where they took place: in the case of LIF, this consisted in transforming the island in the stage of an interdisciplinary show, “written” over the inflated image of emergency by means of space, symbolically reclaiming significant places of collective interaction on the island. In the case of Welcome!, the subversive effect was obtained visually and verbally in those exhibitions and performances that exposed the outdated signification of the museum space. While in the case of LIF the festival seemed to function as an innovative stage for contrasting the tensions generated by the transformation of the island into a divisive borderscape, in Welcome! the clear target was not much the opposition to a geographical boundary, but a wider contestation of the national discourse of immigration policies epitomised at the MNHI in the colonial setting of the building. The priority of both events was therefore to bring people together, in contrast with the political tendency to create and “essentialize” divisiveness, be that in the spectacle of the emergency or that of the Other.

Lampedusa, like Ceuta, Melilla, Calais and other outposts of the increasingly monitored European border-zone, appears trapped in paradoxes of identity and representations. If the political spectacle of migration as emergency remains extremely difficult to oppose on the part of European citizens, activists and artists, events such as LIF can be

read as acts of a dissident performance involving local and international communities through creative aesthetic responses: in such small-scale events, the organizers and the locals appear empowered to represent themselves to the external eye in alternative ways, inviting visitors to experience a different vision of the island. LIF appeared in the position to challenge established visions of the so-called EU “migration crisis”, by bringing forward a subversive predicament voiced through artistic representations and performances. By examining this event, the chapter showed that the format of a community festival benefits the local population because it allows the inhabitants to display a new face of the island and it fosters a festive interaction between visitors and locals. Indeed, Askavusa’s yearly initiative proved to be a symbolic re-appropriation of self-image for Lampedusa: it constituted a regular event aimed at contesting the sense of remoteness and abandon of local citizens but at the same time, particularly in its most recent configuration of different events spread during the year and with the opening of Porto M, it established a local stage for voicing resistance towards the restrictive EU migration policies.

By inviting external participants to join the collective’s claims for a different institutional management of migration, the festival also called to join forces not only against the present handling of the Mediterranean crisis, but also in solidarity with local movements and community values. Thus, it demonstrated that temporary events can have a leading role in promoting an alternative and creative re-thinking of contemporary global balances. Both the risk of commodification and the contradiction of positively celebrating migration in a site constantly affected by sea tragedies appeared resolved by the tactful organization of the local collective. However, the changes in the activity of LIF of the last few years also illustrated the struggles of balancing an event marked by festive exceptionality with the necessity to maintain cultural momentum throughout the year, especially in a location which remains considerably isolated from the mainland over the year, with the

exception of summer tourism. This tension between “normality” and spectacular momentum, which has particularly affected the recent history of the island, remains indeed a problematic aspect of many cultural initiatives which aim to raise social awareness, attract international attention and re-qualify their social potential, but struggle to include their values in the political agenda of local and national institutions. Indeed, the case of LIF suggested that starting from the very idea of spectacle as an aesthetic of exceptionality is a productive step towards new paradigms of representation that both question and transform the power stakeholders of the local community, which ultimately remains the objective of all cultural endeavours engaged with contemporary society.

Conversely, the case of Welcome! was particularly useful to reflect on the counter-hegemonic potential and limits of a festival in the context of a more permanent narrative about French identity and the Republic’s colonial past. In fact, although alternative examples of diffused networks have also consolidated themselves over the last ten years, such as the notable example of the aforementioned *Migrant’scène*, the French festival landscape is still marked by a centralised, Paris-based and nationalised discourse, similar to the case of migration museums. Even in such an interdisciplinary and vibrant example as Welcome!, the festival format appeared hindered from expressing its dissenting force by the surrounding environment of the Palais de la Porte Dorée, which seemed to englobe the event in its poetics of celebration of French nationalism. In both case studies, however, the major obstacle to a more durable impact on society seemed to reside in their intrinsically temporary nature, which prevents even the most radical and counter-hegemonic attempts from leaving a lasting effect on their respective social contexts on a larger scale. At the same time, I have underlined that, particularly in the case of Welcome!, the conflict between the festival’s message of hospitality and the problematic colonial images in the museum makes it possible to read

this site as an ‘agonistic’ space in which different coexisting agendas are expressed, without being reconciled. Indeed, this suggests the importance of including temporary events in the study of cultural representations of migration in today’s public sphere.

Because migration is such a topical and debated theme, it also seems to stretch the ability of festivals to impact society in a durable way. As demonstrated by the interruption of LIF and by the one-off presence of Welcome!, the performative potential of temporary events to mobilize people should not be idealised or taken for granted, but rather seen as a precarious moment of collective gathering, which is also dependent on the contingencies of the political atmosphere. Moreover, if the strategic variety of the programming in the case studies analysed reveals that the format of an interdisciplinary event can successfully attract and interest new social groups and involve them in a reflection on migrants’ rights, it also must be underlined that festivals tend to address the usual members of the public who are already involved in solidarity networks or other forms of activist and artistic commitment. At the same time, I have suggested that festivals often play a crucial role by being an initial spark that can evolve into more permanent presences of dissent in the public space: the atmosphere of heightened expectations on the part of the audience can in fact also motivate organisers to find more durable forms of collective gathering to continue the conversation initiated at the festival, as in the case of LIF with Porto M.

Notwithstanding their intrinsic or contingent limitations, migration festivals emblemize an essentially “positive” *mise en scène* of contemporary mobility which is still much-needed in Europe’s public sphere. With their role of collective rites occurring in a dimension of exceptionality, they appear in a privileged position to host counter-hegemonic pushes towards the affirmation of migrants’ rights which have still not found a place in the institutional narrative of migration. In their collective dimension, these events attempt to extend the

migration debate to the collectivity, by involving audiences and inviting them to participate to an urgent conversation on the state of migrants' rights in Europe. Whether at the centre or the periphery of state rhetoric on immigration and European identity, they appear to rehearse unique imagined communities which transcend local and national boundaries and promote common values of hospitality. Ultimately, festivals embody a powerful performative function which "de-spectacularise" the established rhetoric of migration as threat and invasion, and, through the arts, "re-spectacularise" mobility as a social and cultural opportunity for growth and understanding, reiterating the urgency to re-think current EU priorities in terms of security and to approach migration as a non-exceptional, non-threatening human phenomenon.

## Conclusion

‘[...] To clean our eyes | To see the world differently  
|To see ourselves more clearly’. (Ben Okri, 'Turn on  
Your Light', 1999)

Over the last few years, events which had appeared unthinkable to most citizens of Europe have become a reality. In fact, since the beginning of this doctoral project in September 2014, countless alarming episodes have seemed to irrevocably signal the drift of human rights at the peripheries as well as in the heart of European states, but also in other parts of the globe. Today, while on a daily basis the news of yet another tragedy at sea reaches EU citizens, the government of the United States detains and separates children from migrant parents who are found to be illegally present on US soil in southern Texas. In Libya, asylum seekers endure systematic human rights violations in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean or are denied rescue and are left to die in the open sea.<sup>1</sup> Similar episodes, which are becoming more frequent, open new horizons to the inhumane treatment of undocumented individuals, for whom the right to move or to stay are no longer rights but “privileges”.

The progressive worsening of the state of migrants' rights at the doors of Europe suggests that the questions addressed in this thesis are becoming even more urgent. Indeed, the focus of my analysis has been the role that European cultural representations in advocacy of African migrants have played and are still playing in the public sphere, weighting their beneficial or counterproductive effects on the community to which they are addressed. The thesis has examined a selection of case studies issued from Italy and France as representative

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press and AFP, 'Libyan coastguard accused of abandoning three migrants in sea', *Guardian*, 18 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/18/libyan-coastguard-accused-of-abandoning-three-migrants-in-sea> [accessed 10 September 2018].



European countries. Despite their different specificities in terms of cultural traditions, my analysis has tried to highlight the pervasiveness of certain representational tropes.

The first chapter has considered the case of literary fiction as a highly problematic field. From the examination of *Eldorado* and *Faire l'aventure*, I have concluded that the resort to depicting migrants as heroes or anti-heroes, albeit born out of the desire to compensate their reduction to powerless victims in the media, is controversial because it generates an often fictional, and therefore highly mediated rendition of the migratory experience. On the other hand, problematic effects are also encountered in numerous literary texts such as *Solo andata*, which insist on the victimised condition of migrants, still depicted primarily as Europe's scapegoats.

The risk of further heroicising or victimising the protagonist of Mediterranean journeys has also affected the recent cinematic production of both countries. Nonetheless, the aspect that has emerged even more powerfully from the second chapter is the problematic contiguity between the way in which migrants are spectacularised in the media, and how they are visually portrayed in contemporary Italian and French feature films. In the case of *Terraferma*, I have highlighted the filmmaker's controversial adoption of a metadiegetic gaze that distances itself from the same story, somehow creating a "wall" between the events narrated and the public. As in the case of *Solo andata*, in Crialese's film the figure of the migrant protagonist as a victim is left unvaried. However, a noteworthy element of originality is the way in which Crialese has been able to provoke the European public by providing a symbolic and compelling cinematic rendering of the fear of foreigners as a crowd of "undead" invading the Italian protagonists' familiar space. Fortunate results were also obtained in *Éden à l'ouest*, in which Costa-Gavras reinvented and ultimately succeeded in re-humanising the figure of the migrant as an idealist magician, experiencing the worst that European society has to offer. On the

contrary, the analysis of *Welcome* has offered a chance to reflect on the risk of transforming the migrant's story into an expedient to focus primarily on European characters. Notwithstanding the emotional involvement that Lioret's drama manages to evoke in the spectator, the story can also be interpreted as a problematic case in which the attention has shifted from the suffering migrant to the suffering witness of the story, just like in Ai Weiwei's photograph posing as Alan Kurdi.

Therefore, the first part of the thesis has supported the argument that certain EU cultural representations authored by individual artists can at times succeed in offering alternative visions of contemporary migrations, but a number of recurring tropes are indeed hard to avoid, to the point of seeming ingrained in the external, European gaze cast in these migratory fictional accounts. Indeed, the case studies examined reinforce the sense that migrants themselves have not been involved enough, if at all, in the re-creation of these stories. For this reason, these narratives struggle to effectively suspend the power dynamics between the European director and audience on the one hand, and the migrant as the subject "viewed" by external eyes, on the other. Along these lines, it can be affirmed that most of these fictional narratives fail to become actual meeting grounds for a dialogue and a shared representation between migrants and Europeans.

Such representational trends have been partly confirmed, partly challenged when moving to the study of museums and festivals. Indeed, more hopeful findings have emerged in the second half of the thesis which was dedicated to collective representations and *mises en scène* of contemporary migration. As collective narratives, these media certainly appear to be able to hold more nuanced and complex representations of contemporary migration compared to the individual and auteur narratives considered in the first two chapters. However, other issues are detected, linked to the specifics of those very cultural realms. In the case of museums, major problems derive from the role of hegemonic gatekeepers that museums have traditionally played in Europe,

especially with regards to colonialism and the representation on non-Western cultures. On the other hand, a crucial limit of festivals appears to reside in the relation between their limited duration and the context in which they are held.

In the third chapter, I have attempted to illustrate that the evolution of museum studies over recent decades has challenged galleries and exhibitions to transform themselves into more inclusive public spaces, in which the authority of institutional voices is re-dimensioned by the involvement of diverse citizens and actors in the creation of a plural narrative about today's society. Despite these promising transformations, numerous museums struggle to include alternative voices because they are located and symbolically framed within hegemonic state narratives. The case studies of MNHI and MEM have shown that the persistent colonial and nationalist discourses emerging from the museum buildings tends to hinder the possibility of relocating migrants and their agency at the centre of a counter-hegemonic narrative. However, in both cases the attempts to involve the visitors in shared narratives, and to update the museum's message through temporary exhibitions and events, suggest that these obstacles could also be overcome with more targeted curatorial policies focusing on agency and participation.

The fourth chapter has examined the case of recent migration festivals in shaping new portrayals of Mediterranean mobility. I have argued that, like museums, festivals are becoming essential 'agonistic' spaces able to host conflicting views on migrating and belonging expressed by their stakeholders. I have also underlined here that, different from museums, the essence of festivals is to combine a spatial narrative with a limited temporal dimension. For this reason, festivals can also be identified as collective performances *par excellence*, and can exploit their very temporariness to attempt more daring, counter-hegemonic representations for their audiences. Both for museums and festivals, complex and sometimes contradictory interactions between

sponsors and organisers have been detected, which suggest the complexity of finding new ways of narrating migration in an ethical, coherent and inclusive manner in the European public space. While the case of Welcome! remains after all a top-down initiative organised by a national institution, the case of LIF has shown that it is possible to create bottom-up, local initiatives that challenge the established perception of a social reality like Lampedusa in the midst of the “Mediterranean crisis”. Despite the intrinsically ephemeral nature, I have concluded that festivals perform today a radical re-conceptualization of solidarity and activism networks, which defy hegemonic narratives on mobility but also traditional notions of national community, symbolically attempting to “open the door” not only to displaced individuals, but also to new forms of participatory narratives in the public space.

As I have attempted to show, cultural representations are multifaceted texts on which all the complexities of migration blatantly converge, raising fundamental questions about notions of advocacy, agency and ethics. My specific angle of analysis, focused on EU-authored texts, has attempted to shed light on the countless realms of cultural production in which the voice of the migrant is filtered or mediated by other actors in the public sphere. However, identifying the nature of the “migrant’s corner” can also enable a better understanding of social and cultural dynamics applicable to other contexts of marginalization. Indeed, the challenge of empowering the subjects directly affected by discrimination and violence is not uniquely faced by displaced people, but also by women, members of the LGBTQ community, disabled individuals, exploited workers worldwide. These are all contexts in which cultural power relations must be identified, disentangled and restructured into more inclusive networks, so as to be able to hear the narrative directly from the subjects who are experiencing such challenges in their own lives.

Although it was restricted by matters of time and space, and affected by the rapidly and dramatically worsening state of migrants' rights across Europe, I believe that the selection of case studies examined in this thesis remains highly emblematic of wider tendencies in the ways in which the migrant is being represented in artistic and public narratives today. Certainly, the extremely contemporary nature of this project has determined the risk of constantly omitting relevant new material, both primary and secondary, and the necessity to regularly re-contextualise my cultural analysis in the light of changing historical circumstances. Nonetheless, the texts taken into consideration in the different chapters still do appear to reflect the situation of Italy and France, and the ambiguity with which such representations advocate for the right to stay and the right to move of displaced individuals. Moreover, I believe that my findings can also be fruitfully extended to other EU countries, in which the voice of the migrant equally struggles to be welcomed and included in the public debate.

The question 'what is to be done?' formulated by Žižek about the current state of migration to Europe has echoed throughout these chapters: what is to be written, filmed, exhibited or performed in the public sphere, in order to promote a better understanding of the migrant's story? The findings derived from the mapping in this thesis of the "migrant's corner" – the problematic space occupied by the exemplary European texts analysed in the four chapters – in this thesis seem to suggest that the majority of European representations are doomed to confine the migrant's story to a marginalising corner in the present historical moment. Although born of a strong sense of social commitment to migrants' rights, such a peripheral position, to reference bell hooks's notion of marginality, is not yet a space of resistance, because it fundamentally lacks a sufficient participation of the migrants' voice in the creation of a shared narrative of community. Indeed, their marginal location in the public sphere is not a voluntary,

self-imposed one on their part, but one to which displaced people are still too often relegated in policies and public debates.

In a thought-provoking review of the much-discussed Marvel blockbuster *Black Panther* (2018), Kenyan writer Nanjala Nyabola pointed out that even if the representation of blackness in the film was clearly adapted for a Western audience, the benefits of such a portrayal were greater than its flaws. Quoting from the article:

It wouldn't be fair to expect one film to take on the burden of representation for a whole continent when it is already fighting for the visibility and representation of over 40 million African Americans in an industry that refuses to see them as more than a token. [...] In the spirit of an African proverb I am absolutely just making up, a thing doesn't need to be everything to every person in order to have value.<sup>2</sup>

According to Nyabola, the film was certainly not exempt from reproducing stereotypes of Africa and from offering a "whitewashed" version of black superheroes, based on Western capitalist values. At the same time, these problematic elements seem superseded by the fact that *Black Panther* was one of the first Afro-American blockbusters to introduce fully-developed, strong protagonists in a captivating, highly acclaimed screenplay. Therefore, it represented a noteworthy achievement, if only for this reason.

Despite the extremely different cultural contexts and themes, the issues brought up by Nyabola share many elements with the argument I have defended in this thesis. While I agree with Nyabola that it is extremely unlikely for a work of art to be exempt from ethical complexities, I have maintained that it is still urgent to acknowledge the existence of the "migrant's corner" in the context of the cultural production circulating in Italy and France today, and that it is necessary

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<sup>2</sup>Nanjala Nyabola, 'Wakanda is not African, and that's OK', *Al Jazeera*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/wakanda-african-180313123713872.html> [accessed 10 September 2018].

to find new ways of transforming it into a space of dialogue and resistance.

Much as literary fiction, films, galleries and festivals can shock, move or mobilize the European public to act in solidarity with migrants, cultural action must be produced both by members of migrant communities, *and* by those of the witnessing, host society, in an actual dialogue between the two parts. Only by acknowledging and challenging the persisting agency gap in marginalised communities can cultural texts effectively host a re-formulation of collective and inclusive narratives. In other words, exploring the migrant's corner has underlined that, in order to function as promotions of social change, artistic representations must work towards the transformation of an exclusive "we" into an inclusive one. Especially when issues of identity and community are at stake, investigating the ways in which separations between "we" and "them" are created or reinforced acquires a crucial weight in the negotiation of new definitions of narratives on belonging and citizenship. Indeed, tackling these patterns of representation appears to be the determining factor for a work of art to act as a "bridge", or, conversely, as a "wall" in the process of understanding and advocating for migrant subjects from a European point of view.

In a famous 2010 essay, Achille Mbembe stressed how the 'grande nuit' of the colonial relationship between Africa and Europe has not yet ended.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the two continents are not out of the 'long night' of political and economic imbalances. In the ambiguities of neo-colonial relations, today's Mediterranean migrations stir past and present inequalities, calling for new forms of dialogue and cooperation, distant from the humanitarian model that still dominates international politics and mass communication. Whilst it is difficult to foresee an improvement to migrants' rights in the EU's near future, - or, perhaps,

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<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit*.

precisely for this reason – the role of engaged theory and art appears ever more crucial. In fact, working towards shared horizons of representation appears today the essential tool to ‘clean our eyes’, using Ben Okri’s evocative expression,<sup>4</sup> to challenge the borders and the corners that limit or even exclude the participation of migrant subjects in a debate about our common future.

In this regard, the most promising steps forward in the impasse of the migrant’s corner are coming today from nomadic, hybrid, performative theories which are rooted in praxis and activism, such as the ‘decoloniality’ mapped by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh.<sup>5</sup> These contemporary efforts are leading the way for radically re-contextualising and rephrasing issues of power and subalternity, which embraces environmental and indigenous movements, workers’ rights, women and LGBTQ rights, and indeed migrants’ rights considered in a global and globalised perspective. On a practical level, decoloniality demands new strategies and policies aimed at encouraging the participation and self-expression of marginalised voices. The flourishing of numerous projects of social empowerment for migrants, immersive theatre and participatory art across Europe, both in academic and activist contexts, testifies to the concrete possibility to advance more inclusive forms of narratives for the next decades and for future generations.

Migrants and refugees from the global South are “here to stay”, as a recurring slogan used in advocacy campaigns and demonstrations reminds us. Together with the crucial contribution of decolonial and nomadic thinking, performativity – as opposed to fixed notions of identity – emerges as a key term for the creation of new social and cultural action in support of and with migrants in Europe. For instance, a performative use of language in activist movements for migrants’

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Okri, ‘Turn on Your Light’, *Mental Fight* (London: Phoenix House, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).



rights can already be detected in a growing body of manifestos, *appels* and public declarations which inhabit a meeting ground between political militancy and literary, artistic expression. The ways in which similar texts can help modify perceptions of community and shared values in the global era are still largely unexplored. This is indeed one of the most promising strands of research contiguous to the case studies examined in this thesis, which should be included in future projects on the diverse, expressive forms that collective performances on contemporary migration can take.

In July 2018, the Paris Court of Justice acquitted French activist Cédric Herrou, who had been prosecuted for repeatedly helping migrants and asylum seekers cross the border between France and Italy, on the grounds that he was acting according to a principle of fraternity.<sup>6</sup> This feeble sign of hope, which puts into question solidarity crimes, is a victory for militants and migrants alike, for it acknowledges the untenability of the present immigration policies, and it confirms that it is possible for citizens to oppose the present state of migrants' rights across Europe. In a similar way, the problematic representation of the migrant's story in the EU public sphere should not be seen as the only, inevitable portrayal able to circulate in the public sphere. Understanding and tackling the migrant's corner can lead the way to the exploration of new forms of awareness and activism for and with migrant communities.

Small, progressive changes could happen soon, with the common effort of individuals and institutional bodies to steer towards a more welcoming, transnational notion of community. The contribution of the arts to the debate should not be regarded as theoretical and abstract, but as a veritable action in defence of social

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<sup>6</sup> Le Monde, 'Aide aux migrants: "Mon combat est légitime", se réjouit Cédric Herrou' *Le Monde*, 6 July 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/07/06/aide-aux-migrants-mon-combat-est-legitime-se-rejouit-cedric-herrou\\_5327337\\_1653578.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/07/06/aide-aux-migrants-mon-combat-est-legitime-se-rejouit-cedric-herrou_5327337_1653578.html) [accessed 10 September 2018].

justice. Even if the attempt to evoke feelings of empathy for the migrant's story cannot guarantee that active solidarity will ensue, these efforts must be praised as a call to promote a spirit of community and inclusion both through artistic expression and everyday practice. Indeed, at the present historical juncture, any informed and committed act against the border regime and the humanitarian discourse does seem to acquire the value of a cultural militancy that can progressively pave the way to more inclusive and ethical representations in support of displaced individuals.



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- Black Panther*, dir. by Ryan Coogler (Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures, 2018)
- Come un uomo sulla terra*, dir. by Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer and Riccardo Biadene (Zalab, 2008)
- Fuocoammare* (Fire At Sea), dir. by Francesco Rosi (o1 distribution, 2016)
- Happy End*, dir. by Michael Haneke (Les Films du Losange, 2017)
- Harragas*, dir. by Merzak Allouache (Jour 2 fête, 2009)
- Human Flow*, dir. by Ai Weiwei (Altitude, 2017)
- Journey of Hope*, dir. by Xavier Koller (Claire Films, 1990)
- L'ordine delle cose*, dir. by Andrea Segre (Parthenos Distribuzione, 2017)
- La faute à Voltaire* (Poetical Refugee), dir. by Abdellatif Kechiche (Rézo Films, 2000)
- Lamerica*, dir. by Gianni Amelio (Cecchi Gori Group, 1994)
- Le Havre*, dir. by Aki Kaurismäki (Future Film Distribution, 2011)
- Les Sauteurs* (Those Who Jump), dir. by Moritz Siebert, Estephan Wagner and Abou Bakar Sidibé (Final Cut for Real, 2016)
- Missing*, dir. by Costa-Gavras (Universal Pictures, 1982)
- Nocturne Blanc-Chasseur*, dir. by Sylvain George (Noir Production, 2015)
- Nulle part, en France*, dir. by Yolande Moreau (ARTE, 2016)
- Nulle part terre promise*, dir. by Emmanuel Finkiel (Sophie Dulac Distribution, 2009)

*Nuovomondo* (The Golden Door), dir. by Emanuele Crialese (o1 Distribution, 2006)

*Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*, dir. by Marco Tullio Giordana (o1 Distribution, 2005)

*Respiro*, dir. by Emanuele Crialese (Fandango, 2002)

*Samba*, dir by Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache (Gaumont, 2014)

*Sea Sorrow*, dir. by Vanessa Redgrave (n/d, 2017)

*Soltanto il Mare* (Nothing But The Sea), dir. by Dagmawi Yimer, Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barraco (n/d, 2011)

*Une saison en France* (A Season in France), dir. by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun (Ad Vitam Distribution, 2017)

*Z*, dir. by Costa-Gavras (Cinema V, 1969)

## Appendix 1

### Plots of the literary texts analysed in chapter 1

*Eldorado* (2006) by Laurent Gaudé

The story follows the intersecting points of view of an Italian coastal guard who leaves his job to start a series of solitary wanderings in Africa, and of a Sudanese migrant travelling illegally to Europe, until their casual encounter in Algeria, from where Soleiman will succeed in reaching Morocco and then the Spanish enclave. At the beginning of the novel, Salvatore receives the visit of a woman whom he rescued from a shipwreck some years earlier. She has come to ask him for a weapon to seek vengeance against the trafficker who organised her journey, during which her baby died. The captain is shocked by this meeting and feels that the woman has transmitted him dissatisfaction for his own life and for his inability to react. Shortly after, Salvatore is incapable of helping a migrant who has asked him to hide him in his cabin in order not to be deported after the rescue at sea. Guilt-ridden and restless, he decides to abandon his previous identity in order to become 'l'homme Eldorado', the 'el dorado man'. After burning his papers, he sails towards Libya. Meanwhile, Soleiman prepares for the departure towards Europe. Although he has planned to travel with his brother, he will leave alone because Jamal is too sick to embark on the crossing. The pain of leaving his country is then aggravated by the fact of having to leave his brother behind. Arrived in Libya, Soleiman decides to try to cross the European border from Morocco, rather than travelling through Lampedusa, an area more intensely controlled by border police. He therefore heads to Algeria, where in a marketplace he believes to encounter an embodiment of Massambalo, the god protector

of migrants of which he has previously heard about. This gives him the hope and strength to continue his journey. At the fences separating Morocco from Spain, Soleiman succeeds in escaping the police and crossing the border. In parallel, Salvatore undertakes a reverse migratory journey without a precise itinerary, and disheartened by his guilt and sense of uselessness, tries to kill himself but is rescued by some travellers. Later, his journey casually takes him to Ghardaïa in Algeria. The reader understands from the following chapters that the embodiment of Massambalo was actually Salvatore. Having heard of the legend of this god from other migrants, the Italian understands that Soleiman has taken him for Massambalo, and unable to dissuade him from his intention to pursue the dangerous crossing, he ends up blessing his journey. Comforted by the fact that he has helped Soleiman, and willing to assist migrants by giving them the hope to continue the journey, Salvatore is shortly after hit by a truck and dies suddenly. His last words are a blessing in support of migrants directed to Europe.

*Faire l'aventure* (2014) by Fabienne Kanor

At the beginning of the novel, the young Biram is curious about the world, eager to leave the small town of Mbour. He dreams of becoming wealthy and successful in life, of being stylish and brave like a cowboy. With his father dead and mother hospitalised, he lives with his uncle and works in a restaurant for a low salary, having abandoned his studies. Unwilling to accept his uncle's insistence that he starts a job in a remote town in Senegal, he moves to Dakar at the first favourable occasion, where he starts saving for the sea crossing. At the same time, the character of Marème, a young girl briefly met by Biram before leaving Mbour, is introduced to the reader and alternate chapters follow her days in Italy, years later, where she will marry a wealthy man after divorcing her first husband. A few years later, Biram has left Senegal to



reach the Canary Islands, where he sells souvenirs to tourists, waiting to earn enough to embark for mainland Europe. In a long, albeit different, itinerary of solitude and difficulties, both the protagonists grow disillusioned about their European “adventure”: their idealised plans clash with the world of superficiality and indifference which they will either reject or yield to. In Sicily, Biram and Marème casually meet again: for both, the bittersweet memory of the short time spent together as teenagers is a cherished one, in contrast with the disappointment for the *aventure*, marked by expedients and boredom for Marème, and for Biram by low-paid jobs and continuing illegal status. Despite the harsh reality of his condition, Biram continues to believe he will find better opportunities somewhere else around Europe and, almost addictively, wanders from Spain to France and then Italy, where he finally resolves, after over a decade and countless forced repatriations, to return to Senegal.

*Solo andata* (2005) by Erri De Luca

The long poem, composed of 26 sections, relates the journey undertaken by a group of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to Italy via the Mediterranean Sea, voiced in the first person. The narrative starts by re-evoking their perilous crossing of the Sahara Desert, marked by the heat and silent desolation, stressing the hardship endured by the migrant protagonists. It then continues by describing the embarking on wooden boats after bargaining with the smugglers on the price to pay for the crossing, and the feeling of fear and hope evoked by the sight of the sea in the travellers. During the four days spent in the open sea, a child dies in the arms of her mother, while two other passengers are killed in a fight. In the following sections De Luca, reproduces the sense of frustration and anger felt by the migrants, who are aware of the hardship awaiting them in Europe, in terms of discrimination and

labour exploitation. On the fifth day, the boat is rescued by the Italian coast guards, described as anonym men wearing gloves and masks. Arriving on Italy's southern coasts, the travellers are redirected to a reception centre, where they need to await the outcome of their asylum request. The last lines evoke the difficult memories of the journey, and compare the determination of the protagonists, who have endured harrowing conditions to reach Italy, with their frustration in perceiving Europe's hostility towards them.

## Appendix 2

### Plots of the films analysed in chapter 2

*Terraferma* (2011) by Emanuele Crialese

In the first quarter of the film, we get to know Filippo (Filippo Pucillo) and his family: his father recently died at sea, and while his grandfather wishes to continue living in a traditional way by fishing locally, his mother Giulietta (Donatella Finocchiaro) plans to rent their house to summer tourists and to save enough to move out of the island. At the beginning of summer, they manage to rent it to Maura, a young Italian tourist, and her friends. However, few days after, Filippo and his grandfather, while fishing in the open sea, run into a migrant boat in distress. Some migrants swim towards them, amongst which Sara (Timnit T.), a pregnant woman, and her son. Ernesto jumps in the water to their rescue and then takes them to their house. After giving birth to a baby during the night, Sara needs to rest before continuing the journey. At the same time, Ernesto's boat is confiscated by the police under the pretext that it has no licence to transport tourists, but actually because he has helped and transported to shore undocumented migrants. While Giulietta hides Sara and the children in her house, Filippo tries to distract the young tourists taking them to the beach resort owned by his uncle, who is doing his best to dismiss the rumours about the arrival of illegal migrants, fearing a drop in visitors' presence. As police controls on the island increase, Giulietta decides to help Sara and the children to reach her husband in Turin by hiding them in their car to embark the ferry. When at the harbour all vehicles are being searched, they have to abandon their plan, but Filippo impulsively takes control of the car and drives Sara and the children to his grandfather's

boat. Furiously removing the police's tapes marking the confiscation, he starts the engine and leaves for the open sea for a suspended conclusion.

*Éden à l'ouest* (2011) by Costa-Gavras

Born in a country which is never explicitly mentioned, twenty-something Elias (Riccardo Scamarcio) is first introduced to the public aboard a ship illegally transporting him to Europe to follow his dreams of finding work opportunities in France. While he is rehearsing a few sentences in French with a friend, however, the vehicle is intercepted by the coast guard and Elias instinctively jumps in the sea to avoid being arrested. In the morning, he is brought ashore by the waves and wakes up on a nudist beach, belonging to Eden Club, a luxury holiday resort. Here, he pretends to be a resort employee while trying to find a way to escape, since the police are searching the place, and the residence is surrounded by security and barbed wire. While planning the next move, he meets a German woman who seduces him, and is sexually assaulted by the resort manager. A few days later, he is engaged by a magician to collaborate on his show for the tourists, and at the end of the evening the man leaves him his business card, telling to come visit him at the Lido club if he happens to find himself in Paris. Once Elias manages to escape the resort, he heads towards France, beginning a series of misadventures while crossing Europe: he is robbed by a driver who offered him a lift to Paris, exploited in a recycling factory where they have promised him a residence permit, he is alternatively helped and mistreated by drivers on the road, until he finally reaches Paris. Helped by illegal street sellers to find the Lido, Elias finally realises that it is a burlesque disco bar. When he eventually meets the magician again, the man barely recognises him and rapidly dismisses him while gifting him a plastic magic wand. The perspectives of a good job in France were vain, and the protagonist realises that his migratory struggles have in fact only just begun.

*Welcome* (2009) by Philippe Lioret

In a London apartment, the phone rings. It is Bilal (Firat Ayverdi), a Kurdish seventeen-year-old trying to speak to his girlfriend Mina, who has moved to the UK with her family. Bilal has just arrived in Calais and is attempting to cross the Channel to reach her and start working. However, the harbour is strictly patrolled by police and all vehicles, trains and ferries are systematically searched. Trying to hide in a lorry crossing the border, he is discovered and arrested, but released shortly after since he comes from a country at war. Determined to reach London by any means, he decides to swim across the Channel and to start training. At the swimming pool in Calais, he meets Simon (Vincent Lindon), a melancholic swimming instructor whose wife is divorcing him. While trying to dissuade Bilal from risking his life in the crossing, Simon befriends him and hosts him in his apartment. This is however promptly noticed by a neighbour, who reports him to the police. If Simon starts helping Bilal by chance and to a certain extent to regain the favour of his wife, who volunteers in a migrant association, he will rapidly become conscious of the brutal measures put in place by local authorities to discourage any form of solidarity from French citizens to migrants in Calais. Not only are food distributions by charities interrupted by the police, but migrants are also increasingly banned from public places, while citizens suspected of assisting them are asked to report to the police station to be interrogated. The fact of being questioned a first time by the commissioner, however, only seems to strengthen Simon's conviction about the legitimacy of solidarity: he will continue to help Bilal find a way to reach the UK, developing a father-son bond with him. Discovering that Mina is about to be forcefully married to a cousin, Bilal resolves to risk the crossing, but is intercepted by the coast guard and detained for some days. A few days later, the

young man is released, but he attempts to cross again. This time, a few miles from the British coasts, he is intercepted by the coast guards but, in order not to be arrested, he relentlessly swims away from them to finally drown. In the final scene, Simon gets to London to meet Mina and inform her of Bilal's tragic destiny, while a phone call suggests the possibility of reconciliation between Simon and his wife.